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**Gert Koppel**

**A Disappearing Act**

**A Boy's Escape From Germany**

**TRANSLATED BY  
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Translated from the original German

*Untergetaucht*

*Eine Flucht aus Deutschland*

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## JUST IN TIME

We started running and jumped on the last car just before the train pulled out. We had made it.

I was out of breath and my heart was pounding. Outside, the men in those hated Nazi uniforms were watching the departing train with indifference. I wanted to shake my fists at them. Right up to the last moment they had tormented and intimidated us. It was good to see them getting smaller in the distance. I stared at the silvery rails. Ilse pulled my arm impatiently. She wanted to go back to the compartment, back to our suitcases. I shook my head vehemently. "Not yet!"

"Just what are you doing back here?" she asked.

Here I was, relieved to finally turn my back on this country, but already full of longing for my parents who had stayed behind. I choked and tried hard not to burst into tears. Ilse, my sixteen-year-old sister, gently put her arm around me. I heard Mommy's words resounding in my head: "Ilse will always be there for you. You can rely on her!"

The road ran beside the train tracks. A flag with a swastika waved ominously from a pole. I shivered. Even now this flag terrified me. I despised this swastika! I was angry and full of hatred.

What did I do to you, a voice inside me asked.

Germany was my homeland, the country where I was born, the country whose language I spoke, I, a German boy like any other.

This cursed flag had suddenly changed everything. In a million ways you told us we were worthless, we were not Germans, just Jews, an inferior race.

Get out, you have shouted, out of here, we won't tolerate you any longer. If you stay we will kill you! You are the source of our misery! You plan our destruction!

Why do I, eleven-year-old Gert Koppel, all of a sudden have to leave Hamburg, my hometown? My father risked his life for Germany in World War I. Why is he all of a sudden an enemy?

None of this is true! These are all lies!

And my home I loved so much, my big family, my friends, my school, my piano lessons, my books, my bicycle, my toys...

Everything left behind and gone - forever?

When did all this begin? When did fear become my permanent companion?

## DARK CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

(Winter 1933 - Summer 1935)

The *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party, i.e. Nazi Party) was founded in Munich in 1920, not long after the end of World War I (1914-1918). With the onset of the worldwide depression in 1929, it grew into a political party of the masses. The number of unemployed persons was constantly on the rise in Germany and reached 5.5 million in 1932.

During this period, Adolf Hitler, chairman of the NSDAP since 1921, found many supporters for his official aims: jobs, bread, security, and order. On January 30, 1933 he became Chancellor of the German *Reich*. In the *Reichstagswahl* (parliamentary elections) on March 5, 1933, the NSDAP won 43.9% of the vote.

Focusing on German youth, Hitler systematically tried to imbue them with the spirit of the NSDAP. From the *Bund Deutscher Arbeiterjugend* (League of German Young Laborers), founded in 1926, evolved the *Hitlerjugend*, HJ (Hitler Youth), and the youth organization of the NSDAP. In 1939 this became the "State Youth", and membership was obligatory. It was divided into four groups: *Deutsches Jungvolk in der HJ* (German Young Folk), boys age 10 to 14, also called *Pimpfe* (little boys); the actual *Hitlerjugend*, boys 14 to 18; *Deutsche Jungmädel* (German Young Girls), girls from 10 to 14; *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* (League of German Girls), girls 14 to 18. The Hitler Youth soon turned into a preparatory organization for the army.

The *Sturmabteilung*, SA (storm troopers) was a uniformed political combat troop that belonged to the NSDAP. This militarily organized party army served as an "auxiliary police force" and played a significant role in the party's seizure of power.

Heinrich Himmler, who became Chief of German police in 1936 and then the Reich's Secretary of the Interior headed the *Schutzstaffel*, SS (guard detachment). From 1944 on he served as commander-in-chief of this powerful "reserve army". It was a criminal organization that stirred up hatred of Jews and later organized and, to a large extent, performed the systematic destruction and extermination of the Jews.

As early as 1923, the Franconian Gauleiter (regional leader) Julius Streicher from Nürnberg published the Jew-baiting paper, *Der Stürmer*. It was a propaganda instrument of the NSDAP that incited citizens against "enemies of the German *Reich*" - primarily against Jews, but against Bolsheviks and others as well. On May 3, 1945 Himmler committed suicide and

Streicher was hanged by the Allies for his crimes. In 1933 approximately 500,000 Jews lived in the German *Reich*. On April 1 of that year the NSDAP proclaimed a one-day boycott of Jewish stores, goods, physicians, and lawyers. From April 7 onward, Jews working in public service were forced into early retirement. More and more regulations were issued with the intent of excluding Jews from public and economic life, and in fact, prevented them from earning their livelihoods. Progressively they were excluded from all trade and earning possibilities.

Concentration camps were already established in the cities of Dachau, Oranienburg, Lichtenburg, and Esterwegen by March 1933. At first opponents of Nazism such as the Communists and Social Democrats were interned. In 1934 Hitler put the concentration camps under the control of Himmler. The SS built an intricate system of camps, so that by March 1944 twenty concentration camps existed with an additional 165 so-called "external camps" also known as *Aussenlager*, (satellite camps). Under extreme and inhuman conditions, the Nazis interned people in these camps starting in 1935. The prisoners included political opponents, resistance fighters, habitual criminals, and especially people undesired by the regime because of race, religion, or social status such as Jews, Gypsies, Freemasons, and homosexuals.

## MY SIXTH BIRTHDAY

I woke up with a sense of joy. For a while I lay still with my eyes shut until it dawned on me what day it was: Today was December 21, 1933 - my birthday. I was going to be six. Should I look for my parents? I sneaked through the quiet apartment without making a sound. No, they were still fast asleep. But maybe my big sister, Ilse, would be awake already.

"Ilse," I whispered standing in front of her bed, "Ilse, wake up!"

Still sleepy, she looked at the alarm clock. "It's six o'clock, Gertchen," she said, slightly annoyed. "Come here and sleep a little longer. We are on Christmas vacation." Even at age eleven, Ilse was always very sensible. I cuddled up next to her and fell asleep again until noises woke me up.

By now nothing could keep me in bed. I ran into the living room. It was warm and pleasant there; Mommy had already lit the big tile stove in the adjoining dining room. She was probably in the kitchen making coffee. I anxiously searched all over the room. But it looked the same as ever: In the alcove, surrounded by all the potted plants, stood the huge wing chair, ample and stiff. No gifts were on the table, only the *Hanukkiyah*<sup>1</sup> with its burned down candles and some hard wax stains underneath it on the fine tablecloth. The previous evening we had sung *Maoz Tzur*<sup>2</sup>, and I had accompanied the family on the piano.

Last year the *Hanukkiyah* had been sitting on the windowsill as was the custom. This year Papa had said: "We will put it on the table. Not everybody has to see from the street that Jews live here."

Walter, my best friend who lived in the next house, was not Jewish. He had a Christmas tree in his apartment by now. In a few days it would be filled with bright, shining lights. Like every year, I would go over to marvel at it and pluck off some delicious candies. And then Walter would show me all his Christmas presents...

But where were my presents? I rushed into the kitchen. Before I could utter a word, my mother hugged and kissed me. "Happy Birthday, my big boy," she laughed, "this is a very special

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<sup>1</sup> The Hannukiyah is a special candelabrum with nine candleholders and is lit on the eight nights of Hanukkahs, a Jewish festival of freedom. According to the Jewish calendar, it is celebrated around mid-December, close to Christmas, and the children receive presents

<sup>2</sup> Maoz Tzur is the Hebrew song, which is sung every night during Hanukkah just after lighting the candles.

birthday. In a few months you'll start school. Get dressed quickly and wait to come into the living room until I call you. I bet there will be a surprise waiting for you!"

When I went back into the living room, the whole family was already gathered around the festive breakfast table. There was a big birthday cake with seven candles - six for my age and one more in the middle for long life. Lots of presents were piled up on my father's desk: A group of toy soldiers with musical instruments was arranged in front. They had been missing in my set. I already owned soldiers with guns. Then there was this inflatable elephant I had stared at in the toy store, a bicycle bell from Ilse, a box of cigarettes.

"So that we can smoke together, Gert," Papa explained with a grin. But I had noticed right away that these cigarettes were made of chocolate. Of course, there were a whole lot of "practical" presents as well, such as pants, shirts and handkerchiefs. They only got my fleeting attention.

We were about to cut the cake, when the doorbell rang. It could only be for me. I ran to the door. Walter stood there with a small package in his hand. "Congratulations!" he shouted and entered the living room. Mommy instantly treated him to a big piece of cake.

Afterwards we played with all the new toys until Walter had to leave for some Christmas shopping with his mother.

For lunch I got my favorite food: roasted veal, green peas, potatoes with parsley and Swiss rice for dessert. This was a rice pudding with a lot of whipped cream and jelly stars for decoration. I ate it very slowly. Last time I had gulped down two servings which had made me so sick that I could not get to the bathroom in time.

Ilse had made fun of me, Papa had scolded me, Mommy had comforted me, and Anna, our maid, had muttered, indeed, she already had just enough work without this.

Even though it was my birthday, Ilse could not stop teasing me: "Surely you are eating so slowly because Anna is no longer here, and you will have to clean up the mess yourself?"

Anna was not with us any longer. "We can't afford her anymore," Mommy had explained. "Papa's business isn't doing so well."

Why was that? He was so popular among his clients. Didn't he work enough?

"Most clients do like me," Papa had replied with a sad voice, "but some important clients don't want to buy from me anymore. They are party members now. Ever since Hitler and the Nazis came to power, many people have joined the Nazi Party. They claim that they can't buy from Jews anymore. 'Nothing against you personally, Herr Koppel, but one is under pressure,

'you have to understand,' these clients usually tell me." Papa had shaken his head seriously, adding softly: "I hope it doesn't get worse!" - "And if it gets worse?" I had asked full of fear. Papa had just laughed it off and patted my shoulder. "Don't worry. You know I was a soldier and I'll know how to deal with this."

Anna's absence made me very sad. With all her grumping I still liked her. She used to tell me fairy tales and take me to her parents in the countryside.

Anyway, it was my birthday and I was looking forward to the afternoon when the entire family would come to celebrate.

Soon the first visitors were ringing the bell.

One after the other, my many aunts came in with their kids. Then came Grandma and Grandpa Koppel. Grandma Partos, Mommy's mother, climbed the 106 steps up to the fourth floor moaning and groaning.

"To climb all those steps at my age - this is the last time!" she declared emphatically as always. And Grandma Koppel gave her usual reply: "You just have to climb slowly!"

"Slowly?" Grandma Partos was upset. "I can't go slowly. I haven't got the patience!" That made sense to me. I probably got my impatience from her.

Meanwhile the desk was piled up high with presents. I was the center of all this activity and enjoyed it thoroughly. Later I had to play the piano for the guests, which I did not like so much. Nearly everybody in our family played an instrument. I had only studied for a year so far. But Mommy did not give in until I sat down at the piano.

As I was born on the shortest day of the year, darkness set in early and most of the guests went home soon.

Papa finally came back. He even had to work on my birthday. I ran down two flights and we met on the same step like always. "We are a well-coordinated team," Papa remarked.

Today Papa was carrying a bag. He had stopped at his favorite candy store: Krokant<sup>3</sup>, marzipan, lemon drops, mint wafers with chocolate, nougat, and bitter chocolate for Mommy. We spent a cheerful evening together which ended with music on the radio. At eight o'clock Mommy put me to bed.

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<sup>3</sup> *Krokant*: Chocolate candy filled with chopped nuts.

Once again it had been such a wonderful party. Everybody had come to wish me well and celebrate with me. Erna, our former maid, had not forgotten me either, and like every year, had brought a chocolate-covered marzipan bread for me.

Now I was finally six years old and would go to school. I could hardly wait.

## FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

I knew exactly where my school was. My father had already walked the route with me before. One day he said: "Now let's take your new schoolbag for a walk. He still has things to learn." Papa liked to joke around like this.

That day, I memorized the way to school: First I walked past Aunt Lieschen's old house, then along the Rutschbahn (Chute - that really was the street's name), finally I had to cross a street and already I could see the Talmud-Torah School, a rather impressive building with a small clock-tower.

Back home, I immediately rushed over to Walter to tell him all about it. Walter was not the least impressed. "Every day I go to school by myself, my way is much longer and I never get lost," he simply said.

Walter went to a public school. I would attend a Jewish school, the same one my father had gone to as a child. Back then it was located in the old city.

When I finally found myself inside the classroom on the first day of school and a nice man, Mr. Hirsch, introduced himself as our teacher, I felt overwhelmed and kind of unsettled. Where should I sit? I did not know anybody. The kids looked very different from one another. Not everybody was well dressed. Some wore caps<sup>4</sup>, which they did not take off. I considered this to be highly impolite. I glimpsed at an amiable looking boy with an open face sitting on a bench in the middle row. I sat down next to him.

The teacher read out all the names and asked me, when he had reached mine, if I was related to Max Koppel. Eagerly, I set out to explain our familial relationship but was quickly interrupted. "Now be quiet," Mr. Hirsch said bluntly, "I hope you will be as good a student as Max Koppel!" And more names were called out: "Kohrmann, Kugelmann, Lilienkron..."

My neighbor's name was Rolf Heinemann. I whispered to him: "Max Koppel was such a good student that he jumped a grade, he always got straight A's on his report cards..."

All of a sudden Mr. Hirsch appeared next to me. "Silence, no one is allowed to speak!" Some kids started to laugh and he added: "Laughing is not permitted either. Only I get to laugh - sometimes!"

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<sup>4</sup> Orthodox men and boys wear a head cover all the time as a reminder that, among other things, there exists a higher being above us all. They wear a hat or cap when they are outdoors and a yarmulke (skullcap) indoors.

"This starts off just great," I murmured to my neighbor who didn't budge. But here my teacher was again. This man seemed to see and hear everything. "Follow Heinemann's example," he scolded, "if you disturb him, I'll have you sit in the last row as punishment." This I wanted to avoid under all circumstances. "But he doesn't bother me at all," Rolf objected. Mr. Hirsch pretended not to have heard.

Later on our teacher told us an interesting story about Adam and Eve I had never heard before. I found it a little exaggerated that the two of them were punished so severely for being disobedient just once. Mr. Hirsch asked that someone retell the story. He had shown us how to ask for permission to talk. Snapping one's fingers or shouting "me, me" would be punished. Perhaps one would be sent out of the classroom forever like Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden? This was not going to happen to me. Cautiously, I raised my hand. Mr. Hirsch called me to the front of the classroom, and I started to retell the story from the Bible. I really enjoyed that. Mommy had often told or read stories to me with a lot of feeling, changing her intonation, sometimes speaking loudly, sometimes in a hushed voice. Now I did the same thing and saw that the entire class was listening attentively.

"Well, you certainly know how to tell stories," Mr. Hirsch praised, "but you shouldn't chatter so much. Max Koppel never did that."

Oh, this stupid Max Koppel, what do I care about him, I was thinking, rather upset.

Then recess came and we were led into the courtyard. A rope separated off a small part of it. The other first grade and we were to stay there for the first few weeks. "Baby class, baby class!" some boys from second grade called out as soon as they got near the rope.

Shortly afterwards, the first day of school was over and we ran to the gate where our parents were already expecting us. Mommy and Papa were waiting for me with a big *Schultüte*<sup>5</sup> that I received very proudly.

At home Grandma Partos was waiting for us. She had brought another wonderful *Schultüte*. Once again she had climbed up the stairs: "This was definitely the last time," she vowed like always. When I later reported about my first day at school, I did not mention the incident about the row for punishment.

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<sup>5</sup> A *schultüte* is a large cardboard cone filled with candy given to children on their first day of school.

"I went to school with Berta, your teacher's wife," Mommy told. Papa recalled how Mr. Leopold Hirsch used to be nicknamed "Poldi" at the time when Max Koppel was in his class. I would have to tell this to Rolf the very next day.

"Perhaps you'll also get Herrn Stein, the old teacher," Papa wondered. "He was my teacher and we used to call him 'Olivo with the glass butt, oh!'"

I laughed my head off and wanted to know where the name came from. I learned that at the time there was an Italian by the name Olivo who sold ice cream at the market and who supposedly resembled Mr. Stein. The students then had no trouble finding a good rhyme.

Papa really got into it: "All teachers had nicknames, one was called 'Caraway Cheese' because he was crazy about it. The old teacher Isaak who was actually a very learned man, was called 'Nanny', because he always taught the youngest kids."

"Did you really like to go to school?" Mama inquired.

Now Papa hemmed and hawed before answering. "Actually, it wasn't so much fun back then. There were sixty children in first grade. This was 1902. In the first year everybody had to learn to read German and Hebrew. Today that's easy with only half the number of kids. Some teachers were very strict and used the cane. A few times I got terribly beaten."

"Why did you put up with it? Didn't your parents complain?" I asked with indignation.

"That wasn't unusual then. Talmud -Torah was no exception."

"Today it is different," Mommy reassured me, "however, a spanking or a few strokes with the ruler are still possible."

I was determined not to let this ever happen to me.

"I was quite a rascal and liked to provoke some of the teachers," Papa laughed. "You'll be very different. Believe me, Talmud-Torah is still the best school I know of. Grandpa, Great-Grandpa Hirsch Koppel, and perhaps even your Great-Great-Grandpa went to this school. After all, our family has lived here in Hamburg since at least 1750. And your girls' school, Ilse, has been in existence since 1800. But now we want to eat together and celebrate the start of Gert's schooling."

## FAMILY DAY

Often in the morning after waking up, I would count the days until Sunday. I would calculate: "Another six, another five, ... another three days." On Saturday I would jump up and down the apartment singing: "One more time in bed we lay, then we have our family day!" I had even written a tune on the piano for this little verse.

Family day took place in Grandma Partos' apartment on Eppendorfer Landstraße. Grandma Partos came from Hungary and was a widow. Her husband had been the owner of the big orthopedic supply store at the Schulterblatt (Shoulder Blade was the street's name). Grandma was well off as half of the store still belonged to her. However, now it was managed by her son, my uncle Laczi. Grandma seemed very aristocratic to me, probably because of her elegant dresses and her upright bearing. In her apartment we had to behave. We were not allowed to play or climb on chairs in the "parlor."

Once, I wasn't in school yet, I went to visit with Mommy. Probably I misbehaved and was noisy. Suddenly Grandma clapped her hands, seized me by the back of my neck, and continued clapping - this time on my behind. I was stunned. It didn't really hurt, but I was immediately quiet. "No hubbub in this house!" Grandma warned and was already smiling again. Later, on our way home I said to Mommy: "Grandma is big and strict and wonderful!"

Around the house Grandma never used a handbag. She carried a lovely little basket with her with everything neatly arranged in it: her purse, her numerous keys, her delicate handkerchief, and a lot more. Once I approached her very sadly: "What happened, Gertchen?" she asked right away. "Oh Grandma, I fell on my bicycle and the fork broke. We've already been to the shop but it will cost four Marks to fix it. Mommy says I have to wait." I had not finished yet when Grandma took out her purse and handed me a five-Mark bill. "With the change get yourself and Ilse some candy," she said.

In the years to come, as times deteriorated, many a bill from Grandma's little basket would find its way into her daughters' purses.

At the start of family day, everybody would settle around the exquisite table laid out for twenty to twenty-five people. In the center were the pastry-filled dishes; mountains of snow-white whipped cream piled up in crystal bowls. There were gold rimmed cups and saucers of fine china for the adults and colorful mugs with matching plates for the younger guests. Unfortunately, we

had to wait until everybody was seated before we were allowed to help ourselves. Once coffee and cocoa were steaming from the cups and mugs, however, everybody could eat to his liking.

"At Grandma's table the parents have nothing to say," Grandma used to announce to the children's delight, which couldn't get enough of the delicious Hungarian specialties. Nobody could bake as well as Grandma and nobody prepared so generously!

After coffee was over, the company split into various groups. The men played Skat<sup>6</sup> the women, bridge. The older grandchildren were busy playing word games. The oldest boys and girls disappeared in "dark closets," running in and out giggling and with red faces. We, the little ones, played in the long hallway most of the time. Grandma had even bought two tricycles and a car with pedals especially for us.

In the evening the children returned home with their mothers. The men were often unable to leave their card game. So Grandma invited them to stay and have dinner. Then our fathers would continue playing.

My father sometimes joined the family gathering only in the late afternoon. He was an enthusiastic soccer fan and never missed an important game of the HSV (Hamburg Sport Club) on the Rotherbaum soccer field. It was fine with me because he always told me about it to the last detail. The next day I was able to brag in school with the game's description about which the others only knew from the newspaper. Very rarely did my father take me with him.

One Sunday Papa arrived much earlier than usual at Grandma's. We had heard on the radio that the game had just begun.

"John," Grandma exclaimed in astonishment when she saw him, "I hope you aren't sick? The game has started only now, and I thought it was an especially important one?"

Suddenly Papa looked very tired and sad although he tried to squeeze out a smile.

"I wouldn't call this sick, rather unwanted, that's what I am, that's what we all are."

All of a sudden the room turned completely silent.

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<sup>6</sup> Skat is a card game widely played in Germany, mostly among adults.

Then we heard the details: "Above the cashier there was a clearly visible sign saying in big black letters: 'Jews unwanted!' Some SA men in their brown uniforms were roaming around, slandering' now we are rid of these Jewish pigs. They won't have the guts to come here anymore.' Some of my acquaintances had been waiting for each other in front of the cashier as we usually do. As soon as they saw me, they disappeared. Not even one of them has turned to me or has said something comforting, not even Karl Schmidt with whom I served in Russia during the World War 1914-1918. We were good comrades, but nobody wants to remember this now. The past doesn't count any longer."

Did Papa wipe off a tear? My courageous, strong father surely didn't cry? Still, it was a real tear I had seen.

## THE END OF A FRIENDSHIP

Although I got along well with some of the boys from school, Walter was still my best friend. We often visited each other to play. In our apartment we would make huge structures from empty cigarette tins. Papa often claimed he was actually smoking just to be able to provide me with these boxes.

We built entire cities with high-rise buildings, towers and army barracks. In-between, toy soldiers were strategically placed. We were playing war, which actually nobody could win, as we stopped only after everything had been destroyed and the boxes scattered all over the place.

"Don't play war all the time," my father admonished. "War is terrible!"

Papa should know. For four years he had been a soldier in Russia during World War I and had been wounded there. He still kept the bayonet he had brought back from war. Sometimes, yielding to our requests, he would take it out from his desk and allow Walter and me to hold it for a while.

"Did you stab people with it?" Walter once wanted to know. Papa gave one of his typical answers: "Not at all, I only used it for cutting bread!"

I could not really believe this. After all, Papa had been promoted to be sergeant and had been decorated with the Iron Cross. I had also seen pictures of the Emperor Wilhelm II and the famous Field Marshal Hindenburg. They had their chests draped with medals and ribbons, sported braided shoulder straps, wore pointed helmets, and had well-groomed mustaches. Papa's war photographs only showed him as a regular soldier, very young, very slim and beardless. Because my father didn't want to talk about his war years, I had my own fantasies about war:

The Russians were standing in a long straight line, and from a short distance the Germans were facing them. Right in the center, the Emperor was standing with Hindenburg to his left and my father to his right. On command the shooting started. The Russians did not hit and that way we won the war in Russia...

At Walter's we usually had coffee at four o'clock sharp. I enjoyed the pastry, but we always had to drink a cup of warm milk too, which I dreaded. "Just drink your milk," Walter's mother said amused, "then you'll become as tall and strong as Walter!" Indeed, Walter was stronger than I was. But was this really thanks to the milk?

The two of us also played often outside on the street, sometimes with other kids. As soon as the gas lanterns were lit, we had to go upstairs. Until then we were inseparable.

At some point, Walter's family moved to a bigger apartment on the other side of the street. They seemed to be doing well. Apparently, Walter's father did not lose any customers.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I would wake up and go to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I had noticed that lately the light in the living room would still be on until very late. Behind closed doors, I heard my parents talking in low but agitated voices. Why weren't they asleep already? Once I caught a few sentences.

"We have to leave," Mommy exclaimed, "leave, as long as there is some money left. You earn less and less. How can we go on like that?"

"But where to, Magda? What should we do in another country with a foreign language, without money, and with two young children?"

Mommy did not reply and Papa continued: "These brown devils will go away soon. It can't go on forever. Before long, people will realize that everything Hitler does will only end in war. Surely nobody wants that!"

I slipped back into my room. What devils were they talking about? We did not believe in the devil, or did we?

Was this thing with Uncle Herbert, Aunt Ruth, and Cousin Marion also connected to all that? One day, Papa's brother had come by with his family to say good-bye. He wanted to go to Palestine. In school I had learned that this country had once been the homeland of the Jews and was also called Israel. Uncle Herbert told us he would rather break stones there and if necessary drop dead in the heat than stay here in Hamburg where soon our heads would be chopped off. Cousin Marion, who was a crybaby as it was, did not stop sobbing for a moment during their final visit. Whoever would cry about going on such a big journey with one's parents? It did not occur to me that this might be a journey with no return.

In the meantime the streets had begun to look different. Swastika-banners were fluttering everywhere. Men with swastika-armbands were frequently marching through town in their heavy, thudding, knee-high boots. Sometimes there was music. I enjoyed that. By now I knew what "brown devils" meant. That was how my parents referred to the numerous SA men who were strutting around in their brown uniforms and frightening us. Even worse were the black-uniformed SS men. Most dreaded, however, were the members of the Gestapo, the secret police, which we were unable to recognize because they did not wear a uniform.

Children, not much older than myself, also marched through the streets: they were the Hitler Youth.

"Can't Jews join too?" I asked a bit disappointed and Mommy answered: "Thank God we don't have to participate. All this will have a bad end."

"Don't burden the child with this kind of talk," my father said, shaking his head. But I was already "burdened" even if I did not understand everything.

Walter had changed. A swastika-banner hung from the street window of his apartment too. "They have to. The man works at the bank. It's nothing, really," Papa tried to calm Mommy.

"Nonsense, they are like everybody else. Walter's mother stopped greeting me a long time ago. She crosses the street when she sees me." Terrified, I looked at my mother who rarely reacted so vehemently. "Away, we have to go away!" she screamed and ran out of the room.

Walter did not visit us as frequently as he used to, and when I went to his house a blond older boy would already be there. His name was Harald and he wore the uniform of the Hitler Youth. "Pity that you are a Jew," he once said and laughed strangely, "otherwise you're actually quite nice."

One day I was returning from the dairy where I had bought half a pound of butter. I met Harald and Walter on the street. I ran towards them, when all of a sudden Harald planted himself in front of Walter and said: "Leave Walter alone. He has better friends in school now. We are through with the Jews." He then turned around and walked away. Walter stood there, did not utter a word, and stared straight ahead as if this had nothing to do with him. He gazed briefly at me as if he wanted to say: "Sorry, but what can I do?" Perhaps I only imagined that.

Bewildered, I ran upstairs to our apartment and screamed from the hallway: "You're right Mommy, we have to get away from here. The Germans can go to hell, every one of them, even if it's Walter!"

Suddenly I had learned to hate. I threw myself on the bed and could not stop crying for a long time.

## DREADING THE RUTSCHBAHN

I liked going to school, although in the beginning I was not the most attentive student and was often caught whispering with my neighbor. Mr. Hirsch - we too had taken to call him "Poldi" - frequently called upon me to tell a story. This was my strong side. Soon I could also read and decipher the saying inscribed above our classroom door: "Learn in order to live! Live in order to learn!"

But Erich, one of my classmates, who was always full of ideas suggested: "The painter made a mistake, it should read: 'Eat in order to live! Live in order to eat!'"

Erich impressed me quite a bit, and I was very proud when one day he said to me: "From now on you belong to our party." I had no idea why he had chosen me among so many others. Still, I was ready to join him and a small group of boys in the occupation of a niche in the yard where we had recess. We declared it to be our "fortress" and were ready to defend our territory but were still lacking enemies who would contend with us for our property. Erich, though, had an idea.

He called over some students and declared: "This is our fortress. You are not allowed to enter under any circumstances!" Up to this point nobody had paid attention to our little play corner. That would quickly change: every recess now became a battle for the fortress.

Unfortunately, it was forbidden to scream, run or fight in the schoolyard. Often, a supervisor interrupted our wild games. Our gym teacher was especially feared. When he caught us romping, he stood in front of us and motioned one of us forward. "Take off your cap!" he ordered sternly. The unlucky fellow then got his hair pulled until his head was completely turned to one side. Then the teacher suddenly released his hair and forcefully slapped the upward facing cheek. Usually the same procedure was repeated on the other side. That hurt a lot, but we were not supposed to whimper because the others would have laughed. Once it was my turn, and after that I did not feel like playing fortress anymore. I preferred to walk around the yard with my cousin Helmut Partos, who was a year older than me. My friend Erich also relinquished the wild game, thereby avoiding painful slaps in the face.

Teacher "Poldi" also had his unpleasant side: If a student arrived late to class or forgot his homework, he would receive at least one severe blow with the ruler on his palms. "And now the other hand," our teacher would order, adding: "So that it won't get jealous," or else: "So that you shouldn't become lopsided!"

One day I got terribly bored during math: A problem that some students had not understood was being explained for the third time. Meanwhile I got busy using my pencil case to build a wonderful bridge to my neighbor over the aisle that separated our benches. We enjoyed ourselves moving erasers, penholders, some marbles and little stones back and forth over the bridge. They rolled faster and faster, it was working really well, when all of a sudden the entire structure collapsed with a big bang.

"Koppel, Feiglowicz," a roar filled the classroom, "come to the front!"

My heart sank as I faced "Poldi" in terror. He already had his infamous ruler in his hand. Instinctively we hid our hands behind the back.

"I'll give you some extra work," "Poldi" said to our puzzlement, "I better have it on my desk ready by tomorrow!"

Extra work! This had to be signed by the parents, and I would have to come up with an explanation. But I was not afraid of my parents.

Papa would only use this opportunity to tell about his own wild pranks at school.

Once, for instance, he had locked a teacher inside the classroom and thrown away the keys afterwards. The teacher had to wait many hours for help to arrive and the culprit had never been found. Nobody had ratted on him.

Mommy would probably remind me to think about the ruler earlier from now on.

I never learned the reason why Mr. Hirsch did not hit me that day. Perhaps it was thanks to the amazing Max Koppel. Or was it because Berta Hirsch, "Poldi's" wife, had been Mommy's classmate?

In any case, much less than the pain, I feared the shame to be beaten in front of everyone.

From third grade on, Mr. Stein, who had taught my father thirty years earlier and had been known ever since as "Olivo with the glass butt, oh!" became our teacher. How had he looked, back then? Now he walked slightly bent over, had white hair and spoke slowly. In his class, however, even the more "stupid" students would understand much faster than with other teachers. To me he looked like a good old grandpa.

Once I asked him whether he still remembered my father. I had decided to tell him what a good person John Koppel had become. But Mr. Stein could not remember, and I did not get to talk about my father.

We had a math teacher we called "Guinea Pig." His real name was Meyerstein, which rhymed with *Meerschwein* (guinea pig) and he was feared for his fits of anger. "You damned

brat!" he would rant as he seized a student by the collar and shook him forcefully. That hurt quite a bit.

As a soldier, Mr. Meyerstein had suffered a severe head injury during World War I. He was bold and had a shiny forehead. Rumor had it that he had an "artificial scalp."

"Guinea Pig" was very strict and never gave an "A" on a report card. "An 'A' is only for the teacher," he used to tell the angry parents.

He had a soft spot for me because I could reel off the simple and compound multiplication tables very fast. Twice a week I was therefore allowed to be the "teacher" and test my classmates' knowledge. "Guinea Pig" would give the grades.

Suddenly everybody in class was my friend. "Please ask me the elevens!" I was asked or: "I only know times 19!" Like the waiter in the Landhaus where we sometimes would go for coffee, I put down every wish in secret code.

Horst was the best soccer player in our class, but in math he was a flop. I always wanted to be on his team. As there were plenty of other better players, he never chose me. I got annoyed and therefore asked him to do the eighteens during a math lesson. As I had expected, he did not know it and received a low grade. Afterwards I had a bad conscience and was also somewhat afraid of Horst. When I confessed this to Mommy, she suggested I give him very simple tasks next time. Indeed, he later got a good grade. Nevertheless he never admitted me to his team. He was incorruptible.

After a while soccer became less important to me. I took to playing German dodge ball that suited me better, as I was very good at dodging the ball.

All these things were on my mind on the way to school. With all this daydreaming, I had not realized how late it had gotten. I started to run and heard the clattering inside my schoolbag.

Usually Manfred and Edgar would wait for me at the corner of Hallerstraße and Heinrich Barth Straße. Today they had already left. Nobody was at the Rutschbahn (Chute) either

Suddenly I could feel my heart pounding in my throat. It was not from running; I was frightened. My feet could hardly move. I would have to go by the Rutschbahn all by myself! Together with others was no problem, but alone?

To the right and left archways led into interior courtyards, that were surrounded by apartments. One could never be sure who would appear from there: Hitler Youth members,

perhaps, with black peaked caps, "Aryan"<sup>7</sup> boys who called themselves *Pimpfe*<sup>8</sup>. They always appeared in threes or fours, were tall and blond, and seemed not to be afraid of anything. They knew exactly who was on his way to the Talmud-Torah School. Sometimes they planted themselves right in front of us and blocked our way. Often they would punch down a boy's cap or snatch away someone's schoolbag, run off, and throw it over some fence. Sometimes they would simply beat up somebody.

"Abraham, when will you finally disappear to Palestine?" they would ask sneeringly or hiss: "Watch out, soon the blood of Jews will drip from the knife!" This was a line from a Nazi song.

"Bloody Jew!" they would yell derisively and push somebody toward the wall. Left alone, one was defenseless.

In school, rumor had it that a particularly strong Jewish boy had once successfully defended himself and had pretty much beaten up two of his attackers using his boxing skills. As it happened, a man came by the scene and asked him seemingly friendly: "What's your name and where do you live?" The boy answered him. That same day the man, wearing a brown SA uniform, appeared in the boy's apartment, threatening his father: "I don't care what exactly happened. However, if your son for any reason ever hits a German boy, again I'll see to it that you go to a concentration camp. There we'll get even with you, if you know what I mean."

Why did I have to think about these stories now? Wasn't it exaggerated? Was this possible anyway?

In order to calm down, I told myself that the Hitler-Youth boys were in school by now. Why, I was terribly late myself. At this time of day the coast was bound to be clear. Not so, my relief had been premature. With brazen steps two big boys with black peaked caps approached me. I could not run, that would have been too conspicuous. Seemingly unperturbed, I stopped at a store window and looked at a lonely ceramic cow with black and white spots. It was a dairy. Inside, there was a big picture of the Führer. The "Jews unwanted" - sign, by now a familiar sight, was hanging on the door.

Enemies were surrounding me. I broke out in cold sweat.

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'Aryan' originally referred to people who spoke one of the so-called 'Aryan' languages. The term was taken from 10<sup>th</sup> century linguistics and incorporated into the alleged 'science of race.' Nazism then used it for anti-Jewish propaganda. To be 'Aryan' one had to be a member of the 'Nordic races,' which Hitler called the 'master race,' meaning the Germans.

<sup>8</sup> *Pimfe* (young boys) were members of the youth organization "German Young Folk." At age 14 they moved on to the Hitler Youth.

There had been this instance with Julius. They had stopped him once and he had simply stated: "But I'm not a Jew!" Reportedly, they had dragged him into a cellar and forced him to pull down his pants to verify his claim<sup>9</sup>.

I did not understand what they had done to him afterwards. It was only hinted at behind closed doors. Julius did not come to school anymore. Probably he had immigrated with his parents to a faraway land where there existed no SA and no swastika.

I was still in front of the ceramic cow. Warily, I turned my head. The boys had long since passed without paying any attention to me. I had outsmarted them.

"The Jews are dangerous and shrewd," it said in the *Stürmer*, which was displayed behind glass cases on the streets, for everybody to read free of charge. The *Stürmer* always had revolting pictures. They showed Jews with shaggy beards, big crooked noses, ugly long ears and protruding bellies. Between their filthy fingers they tightly held either money or a young German girl, "Aryan" and blond.

That was not how we looked, not my father, or my uncle Laczi, or Grandpa, not even the chief rabbi Dr. Carlebach who in fact wore a long, but well-kept beard<sup>10</sup>. Not even our teacher "Guinea Pig" bore any similarity with these monsters.

The Jews were described as sly and treacherous. Was I sly because I had stood in front of the store window?

I shook off my thoughts and started to run. Already I could see the Grindelhof, green and shady, and on the other side our school. Above the entrance, flanked by two columns, "Talmud-Tora-Realschule" was written in big letters. To the right gleamed the dome of the big synagogue. Never before had this sight seemed to me so familiar and reassuring. The clock on the tower showed that I had one minute left. Relieved, I ran across the schoolyard past janitor Ahron, who was already at this post when Papa had been a student. He had his pocket watch in hand, but did not mention anything about being late. Friendly he returned my hasty greeting. I dashed through the hall, hurled my coat onto the hook, and sank into my bench in the very last moment before Mr. Stein entered in a deliberate pace.

That was it! The lesson could start. The dangerous Rutschbahn was forgotten.

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<sup>9</sup> Jewish boys are circumcised, i.e. the foreskin of the penis is removed on the eighth day after birth as a sign of entering the religious community.

<sup>10</sup> Only Orthodox Jews do not cut their hair as the religious laws stipulate. The *Stürmer* described all Jewish men as having long beards, which did not correspond to reality at all.

## LODGINGS

"Presently it will get slightly cramped in our apartment," my mother announced one day. "Aunt Trudel and her kids will move in with us."

"Is our apartment big enough for seven people?" I wondered.

"Not really," Mommy admitted, "but Aunt Trudel has big problems."

Uncle Berthold Gumpel, Aunt Trudel's husband, was general manager of the Hamburg shipping company "Bernsteinlinie<sup>11</sup>." A few months before, he had gone to Belgium to relocate the headquarters to Antwerp in order to avoid the company being "Aryanized." While Uncle Berthold had been away, the Jewish owner and some of his Jewish employees had been arrested and put on trial for foreign currency violations.<sup>12</sup> In order to force my uncle's return, Aunt Trudel and her children were stripped of their passports and thus, in essence, made hostages. They were trapped in Hamburg and were unable to leave Germany the way they had planned. My uncle had intended to settle with his family in Antwerp. The furniture had long been sold, the apartment vacated. Aunt Trudel and the kids had planned to spend the last few weeks in a boardinghouse. Her thirteen- year-old son Kurt was already in boarding school in Belgium.

Now they would come to live with us. This arrangement would allow Aunt Trudel to take her time to arrange for exit permits, and her children, Fee and Tommy, would not have to be alone.

Together with the Gumpels we made up a really large family. I thought that was neat. In the morning there was always quite a rush for the only bathroom. For us kids it was lots of fun, less so for the adults. I was not the youngest anymore either, because Thomas was three years my junior and Felicitas a little over a year younger than me. Even though Tommy was so little, I could play with him quite well. He was interested in ships and had a case full of ship models. We loaded the freighters with toy cars and sent them from New York to Hamburg, simulating the "Bernsteinlinie."

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<sup>11</sup> It was the only Jewish-owned shipping company in Germany and perhaps in the whole of Europe. Of course, this was a thorn in the side of the Germans.

<sup>12</sup> German currency, and even more so foreign currency, were prohibited from being taken abroad or being left abroad. An international company such as the Bernsteinline (whose ships sailed from Hamburg and later from Antwerp, to New York and Haifa) needed money in every port. Therefore, it was easy to accuse it of foreign currency violations. The owner and employees received prison sentences, and only after serving out their full terms were they allowed to emigrate to the United States. Later, people were executed for foreign currency violations.

With Tommy's sister I had nothing much in common. She spent most of her time with Ilse. Fee had reddish hair, light skin, and lots of freckles. That is why I could not help but sing over and over again: " Red hair, freckles from the sun, luck she needs, money has she none!"

Fee had no sense of humor, and she would burst into endless tears right away. Sometimes the blubbering would go on for more than an hour. I got scolded whenever my little cousin cried. The grown-ups said: "The situation is hard on her, she misses her father. We must have lots of patience with her!" I had little patience, but when she would cry so heartbreakingly I felt sorry for her, and also a little ashamed.

In time, I got to know another side of her. She was a very good biker and knew how to run really fast. We often went out to play in Innocentia Park. Once she fell off her bike and bruised both her knees. I lent her my handkerchief and brought some water to clean the blood. To my astonishment she did not cry at all, now that she had a good reason to. Meanwhile I realized that with her delicate frame, her red hair and her jolly freckles she actually looked very pretty. I think I even felt a little in love with her.

Ilse and I could not imagine anymore living without our aunt and her children in our apartment. For all her troubles, Aunt Trudel was always cheerful and confident. All the time she found something to laugh about, and her vivaciousness was contagious. Like my father, she would not give in.

One day she came into the apartment like a tornado and called us from the door: "Come everybody! We've got something!"

Beaming and loaded with parcels, our aunt distributed presents to everybody and then danced with her kids around the table singing resonantly to the tune of the Hungarian Rhapsody by Liszt: "The passport is here, the passport is here! Off we go, off we go!"

She produced three new passports and three tickets and rejoiced: "Tomorrow we leave, finally. We leave, we leave, everybody, everybody leaves...."

Not everybody left, of course. But everybody had to say good-bye the following evening. Together with Grandma Koppel and Aunt Tilly's family, we accompanied Aunt Trudel and her children to the railway station.

"If you could only come with us," Aunt Trudel said with tears, "but this is impossible. As soon as I am out of here, I'll do everything so that you can join us soon."

This time the adults were sobbing. I had never seen Grandma so sad. Aunt Tilly was unable to calm down, and even her otherwise wild sons were silent and serious. Only Fee

showed her bravest side. She did not cry. In an unobserved moment, she quickly kissed me good-bye. It was the first time a girl had kissed me, and I liked it a lot.

When the train left the central station, we envied our relatives their freedom.

## THE BROKEN HAND

"Ilse, what's the matter with you?" my mother asked worriedly during lunchtime. My sister sat brooding in front of her filled plate without touching it.

"Unhappy love, Ilse?" my father joked, but Mommy looked at him disapprovingly.

"John, be serious for once. And you, Ilse, please tell us why you won't eat today although it's your favorite food!"

Ilse sniffed silently and then vented her feelings: "You know, it's so hot outside, and I wanted to go with Inge for a swim at the Kumpunder Lake this afternoon. We were really looking forward to it. But this morning we were told in school that they have this sign "Prohibited to Jews" over there too. We were explicitly warned not to go there in order to avoid harassment in case they recognize us."

"Recognize?" Papa tried to cheer Ilse up, "you don't look any different from those BDM-girls<sup>13</sup>. Did you forget that you are Erna's daughter? Look into the mirror, you are a copy of her<sup>14</sup>."

This was an old family joke we had already laughed about a lot. Years ago Erna used to be our maid. She had worked for Mommy's parents and had come along with my mother, her "dowry" as my father liked to joke. Indeed, Ilse was the only one in the family who had some similarity to her: she was tall, blond, and blue-eyed. Erna had left us long ago and now worked in her husband's printing shop. She and her husband Gustav, nicknamed "Gusch", were not Jews, but remained reliable friends of our family even during difficult periods.

"Don't worry, you can go swimming," Papa encouraged my sister, "and forget about those signs."

"Yes, and your student ID you better leave at home so nobody will know who you are. And if they don't believe your age, you simply pay more," I suggested enthusiastically. That was exciting.

"But if something happens and she has no ID?" my always farsighted mother reminded slightly uneasy.

"What can happen anyway?" Ilse asked boldly. Her bad mood had disappeared.

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<sup>13</sup> The German youth organization - *Bund Deutscher Mädeln* - League of German Maidens.

<sup>14</sup> Hitler's ideal of the 'master race' was a white, slender, blond, and blue-eyed young person.

"If she drowns, nobody will ask what she was. Besides, they won't be able to bring her in here anyway or else everything will get wet!"

Papa could not help it, he just had to make fun of Mommy.

Ilse hugged her parents and was already on the phone to make an appointment with her "half-Aryan"<sup>15</sup> cousin Inge.

The ban did not particularly affect me. The word 'pool' reminded me of disgusting chlorinated water in mouth, nose and eyes, of spitting, choking, and fear. Some time ago I had taken swimming lessons. Once I told my teacher proudly that I was a student at the Talmud-Torah School. Perhaps I just imagined, but from then on he was even ruder to me than before. Increasingly, I felt pursued everywhere. One day - I was standing shivering and quaking in front of the pool - he simply lifted me high up and, laughingly, threw me into the deep water. "A German boy is not afraid of cold water!" he commented mockingly. I could already swim fairly well and managed to reach the pool's steps. In my excitement I had swallowed a great amount of water. Without a word, I left my teacher and went to the locker room.

My mother was waiting for me outside and immediately realized that something was wrong. I was fuming. I described to her what had happened. "I'll never go there again!" I concluded. And that was that. I did not even want to go swimming with Ilse.

Shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon, the doorbell ran. It was deafening. Inge brought Ilse home. She was not a corpse, but she had her arm in a sling and was completely in tears. What had happened?

At first everything had gone well. Nobody had asked for the student ID. People were having fun, and soon Inge and Ilse had forgotten about this mean sign and had enjoyed the clear and refreshing water. Afterwards they had sunbathed lying on their towels, and a few older boys had even stared at them with some interest. Suddenly Inge got up and ran to the nearby gymnastic equipment. Ilse followed her. Both were excellent gymnasts and practiced with full energy on the bar. While dangling with her head down it happened: Ilse lost her grip and tried to prop herself up, but the next moment she sat in pain on the sand below the bar holding her left hand.

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<sup>15</sup> A "half-Jew" or "half-Aryan" was a person who had only one Jewish parent. A "full-Jew" was everyone who had three or more Jewish grandparents. If Germans had two Jewish grandparents, but were Christians themselves, they were "first degree *Mischlinge*" (of mixed blood). In 'cases of doubt' the authorities made the decision as to "how Jewish" someone was. In the last year of the war all "half-Jews" growing up as Christians were also in danger.

One of the older boys approached them and asked with an open, friendly smile: "Can I help you?"

Ilse helplessly showed him her already slightly swollen hand.

"That doesn't look good. It seems broken," the boy said competently. "Come on, I'll take you to the first-aid station. It is right over here. I am familiar with these things, I learn that in the service."

When Ilse heard the word "service" she got alarmed. "Service," that could only mean those group hours in the Hitler Youth. This amiable looking boy has certainly learned in his service what inferior race the Jews were. If he knew, she thought nervously. Under no circumstances would she go to the first-aid station.

The boy interpreted her panic differently: "Are you afraid they will hurt you? Don't worry! They'll only call your parents to pick you up."

"They are not at home!" she said hastily. "Besides, I can walk. I didn't injure my foot, and Inge will accompany me."

"By the way, my name is Dieter Haller," the boy introduced himself politely. Inge and Ilse nodded absentmindedly and quickly packed up their stuff. To their surprise, Dieter was waiting for them at the exit, dressed and ready to leave.

"We'll make a sling for the arm from your scarf," he said in a tone that did not allow any disagreement, "and then I'll take you home to make sure you arrive there safely."

On the way home he told them: "I want to become a doctor like my father. I already do my service in his clinic twice a week. I enjoy helping out, especially with children. I know how to calm them if they are afraid." Here he looked at Ilse with an amused twinkle in his eye.

At the door Dieter said good-bye, repeated his name, and wished them well.

Ilse had been on the verge of telling him everything, but then she recalled all the awful stories that were going around in the past months and had decided not to although Dieter seemed really trustworthy.

These sad stories were not invented: Longtime friends suddenly withdrew without any reason, physicians refused to treat Jewish patients, while Christian patients stopped visiting Jewish physicians. Some tried to justify themselves: "We have nothing against you, it's just because of the neighbors ... because of acquaintances ... because of the landlord...." Many relationships fell apart from one day to the next. Many a landlord got intimidated and

discontinued the lease for Jewish tenants. Others might have been pleased to have an official excuse for what they intended anyway.

Grandma had said to me once: "As soon as people wear a uniform they become wild animals." Obviously, there was something to it.

Ilse was certainly right to keep her distance from Dieter, although she seemed to be sorry about it. She was still crying from excitement but also from pain. Her hand had turned blue and was terribly swollen.

My parents took Ilse to Dr. Bohm, who put a thick cast around her arm. I had to get painkillers from the Rosen-Pharmacy on Grindelberg. On the way back, I stopped by the pastry shop Puseel where Jews were not "unwanted" yet and bought Ilse a piece of cream cake for comfort. My scant pocket money was not enough for two pieces, but Ilse always shared with me anyway.

## AN IMMINENT STORM

### (Fall 1935-Spring 1939)

Two years after the National Socialists had come to power, the almost total removal of Jews from culture, arts, and sports had become part of Germany's everyday life. Scientists and university professors were ousted; for Jewish students a quota system was instituted. Jews were no longer allowed to work as physicians and claim insurance reimbursement, as CPAs, or as journalists. After having been excluded from public service, the same happened in the private sector, where Jews were no longer permitted to manage retail stores or workshops, and even more so, industrial enterprises. Purchasing real estate was prohibited as well. They were even stripped of their driver's licenses. Everywhere they were confronted with signs such as "Jews prohibited" or "Jews unwanted."

At the party convention in Nürnberg on September 15, 1935 the "Nürnberg Laws" were issued including terms which made Jews second class citizens. Mixed marriages or extra-marital relationships between Jews and "Aryans" were considered to be a *Rassenschande* (racial disgrace); they were prohibited and punished with prison or hard labor. Because of strong economic pressure, the Jews had no choice but to emigrate. Jewish companies were then transferred to "Aryan" ownership. In reality, this amounted to the looting of Jewish assets, as these were not real sales transactions. Many Jews ended up losing most of their assets.

By the end of 1938, one third of the Jewish population had left the German *Reich*.

Beginning August 1938, Jewish women had to use the name Sara and men, Israel as a middle name, and from October on, their passports were marked with a *J*. This regulation was stipulated by Switzerland in order to "protect" itself from the huge numbers of Jewish refugees. From November 15 onward, Jewish children were no longer allowed to go to public schools. On October 6, the Polish government announced the expatriation of all Polish citizens who lived abroad and did not have a special stamp of approval in their passports. These stamps, however, were only available in Poland. The Poles wanted to rid themselves of those Jews with Polish passports who had already been living in Germany for many years. In response, on October 28, 1938 the Nazis reacted immediately and arrested 17,000 so-called "stateless Jews" and shipped them off to Poland.

Propaganda minister Josef Goebbels initiated a new phase in the persecution of the Jews during the night between November 9 and 10, 1938: In the course of allegedly "spontaneous

demonstrations," nearly all synagogues and many Jewish cemeteries, as well as more than 7,000 stores and numerous apartment buildings of Jews in the German *Reich* were destroyed or damaged. The pogrom, executed by members of the NSDAP and the SA, took the lives of hundreds of Jews. More than 30,000 Jews were arrested and temporarily put into concentration camps. The excuse for this terrible devastation was the assassination of vom Rath, the Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, by a Jew. Because of the millions of glass splinters everywhere from the many broken windows, this pogrom is remembered as the *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night). The German government then imposed a special tax on the Jews to the tune of one billion *Reichsmark* as payment for repair of damages.

In 1939 nearly 80,000 Jews left the German *Reich*. More and more countries, however, refused to issue visas to allow the persecuted to enter their countries.

## THE WORLD GETS SMALLER

After the enactment of the "Nürnberg Laws," fear increasingly overshadowed our daily lives. Hearing Hitler's voice on the radio gave us the creeps. Still, we were glued to the radio. We were happy when the Führer "only" cursed world Jewry without threatening us German Jews specifically.

One day he yelled in a speech: "With only a bundle over your shoulder you came to our country, with only a bundle over your shoulder you will leave it!"

I asked my father whether our family had also come to Germany with a bundle over the shoulder and where the Koppels were from originally.

"You know, Gert," Papa said, "I knew my grandfather well and he told me from time to time about his grandfather. Do you have any idea when this ancestor of yours lived?"

Immediately I started to calculate: "There are, including me, six generations, that means nearly 200 years ago." I was puzzled.

"Quite right," Papa confirmed. "My grandfather's grandfather must have lived here around 1730. Hamburg was not as big a city as today. Supposedly he had come from a small place in southern Germany. When and why he settled in this town, I don't know. Many Jews, perhaps even our ancestors, already lived in Germany at the time of the Crusaders<sup>16</sup>. Others came only after the Spanish Inquisition<sup>17</sup> started, which was still 500 years ago."

"And they really came with bundles? They must have been quite a bunch of adventurers."

Papa smiled when he saw my face flush with excitement.

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<sup>16</sup> In the Middle Ages, i.e. from the end of the 11th until the end of the c13th century, the church encouraged and supported the Crusades. Holy sites, such as Jerusalem, were to be liberated from Islamic rule, the Holy Land (Palestine) was to be taken back in its entirety. As the Crusades were also politically and economically motivated, frequent pogroms and lootings were launched against Jewish inhabitants in villages. Many Jews were killed in the course of the Crusades.

<sup>17</sup> The Inquisition was a religious court of the Middle Ages, already established in the 12th century, with the mission to detect and sentence heretics. In Spain, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella - known as the Catholic Kings" - reintroduced the Inquisition in the 15th century. In 1492 they issued a decree of expulsion. As a result, 200,000 Jews who were unwilling to convert to Catholicism had to leave the country, destitute. Jews had lived in harmony with Spanish society for many generations. After the expulsion, Spanish Jews migrated to countries along the coast of the Mediterranean (France, Italy, Turkey), others settled in German states.

"It was normal at that time to travel with very little luggage. There were no trains or cars then. And of course, not only Jews had come to Hamburg. The ancestors of a good many, nowadays very respectable, Christian citizens of Hamburg had at some time migrated to the city and stayed. Among the Jewish citizens, each generation managed to advance somewhat in its social position. There are rather well off people among them today: physicians, lawyers, scientists, rich businessmen and bankers, but also inventors, musicians, and other artists. You know, though, there are many, many poor Jews in this town. Still, most of them are middle-class, like we are, and they hope for a better future."

"If we stay here, we can just keep on waiting," Mommy remarked with bitterness in her voice.

"You are right," agreed Ilse, who had also joined our conversation. "We have to leave. Everybody else is doing it. One of my classmates is going to Asunción, I don't even know where that is. Another one was sent by her parents to relatives in England she has never even heard of. She has this handicapped brother who just stares out in space all the time. No country wants to take such a child, so her parents have to stay behind<sup>18</sup>."

"Enough of that," Papa abruptly interrupted our heated discussion. "Come on, Gert. It's Sunday. We have to go to the Central Train Station to buy my cigarettes. We'll meet you two ladies at Grandma's for family day. Or won't you be able to get there without gentlemen accompanying you?"

"Oh, come on," Ilse snapped. "What do you think?"

"You should have said 'the weaker sex,'" I goaded my father in a low voice. But he whispered: "It's all a matter of strategy. We don't take a chance that the ladies won't cook dinner for us tomorrow."

"Don't worry, they would never dare," I said pompously. "And so what - we men always stick together!"

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<sup>18</sup> Using the provisions of the racial laws, the Nazis ordered the annihilation of "unworthy life." Seventy thousand handicapped and sick persons were gassed! This hideous activity was terminated only after protests from the church.

We left for a stroll to the railway station. These days Papa spent even more time with me. He could no longer go to soccer games. Theater, opera, museums, movies were equally out of question. Everywhere were big signs saying "Jews unwanted," "Jews may not enter," "Jews prohibited." Some stores would simply display the *Stürmer* with its ugly caricatures in the shop window.

Meanwhile our class had taken in Jewish children from public schools, which they were no longer allowed to attend. Even with these new students, enrollment barely increased, as more and more Jewish families emigrated and went to countries whose names I had hardly even heard before.

One of my new classmates was named Paul Neumann. He used to ask me lots of questions during recess.

"Why does Mister Nachum always greet us with 'Shalom Yeladim?'"<sup>19</sup>

"That's normal. He's our Hebrew teacher."

"For me something else was normal until recently," Paul replied. "Our class had to call out loudly '*Heil Hitler*' every morning and salute with our right arms stretched forward. We even practiced this so that it would look smart. This was mandatory. Jewish kids, though, were not allowed to participate. As it was, we had to sit in the last rows. We were never called on except to be punished. Many teachers would express their hatred of Jews with the cane."

"You were hit too?"

Paul turned red. "Once I couldn't sit for days."

"In our class it was also terrible," another new boy interrupted. "We had a teacher who would call us to the front of the class during 'race education' to perform measurements on us which should prove that our bodies were malformed and that we belonged to an inferior race!"

Thus I was beginning to realize how lucky we were to be at the Talmud Torah school, even though some of the teachers were very strict.

The newcomers were unaware of many Jewish practices, because most of them came from families who were Jews on paper only. The Jewish religion was not essential to my family either. To our parents it was enough that we went to a Jewish school for the sake of tradition<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> This is a greeting in modern Hebrew and means literally: Peace on you, children.

<sup>20</sup> Many German Jews were assimilated and considered themselves to be Germans first and Jews second.

"Why do we have to read the Bible in Hebrew?" one of the new boys asked Mister Stein. "At home we have a thick Bible, but the text is in German. It's easier for me to understand."

"Yes, also Christians read our Hebrew Bible - it is their 'Old Testament' - only in German," our teacher agreed. "But you know from your own experience how it is with translations. Everyone translates a bit differently, even very simple texts. Sometimes the meaning of a text is not fully understood. Even very smart translators can make mistakes. That's why Jews have read the holy Torah<sup>21</sup> in Hebrew from time immemorial. No changes should possibly sneak in. They taught it to their children from an early age so that it wouldn't be a foreign language to them."

"I could say prayers in Hebrew by the age of three," Wolf said proudly. "And my father has shown me the Hebrew letters." Some students nodded in agreement. They had had the same experience.

I remembered how difficult things had been for me when I first started school. Unlike the "orthodox,"<sup>22</sup> I had not known one word of Hebrew.

"I didn't even know you open Hebrew books the other way round, start at the last page so to speak, and that you read from right to left," I said into the silence of the classroom.

"You'll manage!" Mister Stein encouraged the new students. "And you, Koppel, raise your hand from now on, before you fire away."

I turned red, but Mister Stein did not punish me. Punishments became increasingly rare. I think the teachers did not want to make our lives even more miserable. We had also become more restrained with our pranks. Why annoy the teachers? We knew they had their own worries and many of them stayed in Germany out of a sense of duty toward us.

Paul and I were getting along better and better. His father had been a judge but was not permitted to stay in his position any longer. The family was probably not doing very well. In fact, I wondered how they made ends meet.

"Can you come over this afternoon?" I suggested to him during a recess.

"I can't. I have my private Hebrew lessons," he regretted.

"Isn't that very expensive?" I inquired cautiously.

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<sup>21</sup> The Torah consists of the five books of Moses (Pentateuch), which are the first five books of the Bible. The text is handwritten on a scroll of parchment. It is always covered with some type of richly decorated mantle and kept in an artfully carved wooden shrine (wall chest) in the synagogue. A portion of the Torah is read every Shabbat morning. (Shabbat, the Jewish Shabbat, is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday).

<sup>22</sup> Only about 25% of my classmates were orthodox Jews who went to synagogue regularly.

"No. The school principal gave us the names of some older students who need money and give lessons for a small fee. Three times a week a sixteen-year-old student comes to my house to study with me. Afterwards he stays with us for hours on end. I think he has a crush on my big sister. His father used to be one of the most famous photographers in Hamburg. Now he's got nothing to do."

"Because he is a Jew?" I asked rather stupidly.

"Why else?" Paul asked annoyed. "He used to have a terrific store at the Neuer Wall. But his "Aryan" partner, who pretended that he was forced to join the party<sup>23</sup>, took it over thereby "Aryanizing" the business. He hardly paid anything for it."

Paul's mood had deteriorated abruptly. I wanted to change the topic quickly and asked: "Tell me, if everything is so difficult for you here at this school, do you miss your old school?"

Paul looked at me in dismay. "No!" he screamed so loudly that some students gazed at us in astonishment. "I'd never go there again even if it was the easiest place in the whole wide world!" Indeed, tears ran down the face of this big boy. What else might have happened to him? I did not dare to ask.

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<sup>23</sup> No German was forced to join the NSDAP (Nazi Party). Most people became members because of the numerous advantages of official membership: e.g. promotion as a public servant, admission to the public health system, opportunity to buy Jewish possessions cheaply, etc.

## THE SHOEHORN

Uncle Laczi Partos, Mommy's brother, had a special position within our extended family. He was Hungarian, and therefore, in the beginning, he did not have to worry as much about the Nazis as did the German Jews.

Like my father, Uncle Laczi dealt with orthopedic devices. He was not a sales representative, though. He manufactured splints, prostheses, corsets, trusses and foot supports himself.

His store and workshop were located on a street called simply Schulterblatt (Shoulder Blade). One could hardly imagine a more suitable address for an orthopedic shop.

For some time now, my father had been working in the afternoons at Uncle Laczi's, as his income as a sales representative had dropped considerably. Papa knew how to deal with customers. He also did the bookkeeping. Besides, he handled the difficult contacts with the Nazi authorities. He was not frightened and could therefore negotiate better than my uncle.

Once I accompanied my father to one of these offices All of a sudden an official appeared from the back and yelled at Papa in front of the other clerks and the people waiting in line. It scared me. "What do you think you are doing walking in here without an appointment and on top of it with a child. What nerve!"

Strangely, my father did not say one word in his own defense, but I was shivering from fear. In whose hands had we fallen?

"Come into my private office right away!" the official continued yelling.

With lowered heads we followed the fuming man who quickly closed a thickly padded door behind us. Suddenly he became very friendly and smiled at us: "Oh man, Koppel, isn't that something, you turning up here just like this. Don't you remember me? I am private first class Meyer II, Hamburg Sixty-seventh Regiment, Estonia and Lithuania. I recognized you immediately. Your boy looks just like you when you were young and handsome. Well, as you can see, I became an important man."

The former private Meyer pointed to a party badge in his buttonhole. "You need that, otherwise it is impossible to advance. When you mentioned before that you were John Koppel coming on behalf of the orthopedic store Partos whose owner is Jewish, as everyone knows, I thought: 'Now I have to pretend in front of my colleagues and the public, because here everybody watches everybody.' John, what can I do for you?"

Within minutes everything was arranged to Papa's complete satisfaction, and we left the office through a back door. People outside were probably thinking we had been handed over to the Gestapo. And that is what they were supposed to believe. I was happy, although the shock was still sitting in my bones. Mister Meyer had helped Papa, and I had learned that I looked like my father. I was proud of that.

I liked to visit Papa in the store on the Schulterblatt, and I always went down to the workshop. The employees let me play around with the machines for a while: I was allowed to drill holes into aluminum plates or stitch together pieces of leather.

Getting there itself was worth it: We passed through streets lined with small shops and pubs. There was always something new in the windows to discover. These colorful sights were complemented by equally vivid noises: ringing streetcars, honking cars, and rattling horse-drawn carriages.

Not far from Uncle Laczi's store was a small cobbler's shop where we frequently dropped in. One had to go down a few steps and then was suddenly in a dimly lit room filled with shoes awaiting repair: heavy, worn-out work boots, delicate pumps with high and pointed heels, and many children's shoes in all sizes. In the midst of all these run-down shoes sat the master, Mr. Lubinsky, bent over his work, sewing, hammering, and gluing.

His wife waited on the customers. Mommy knew Mrs. Lubinsky well; she too used to be "a kid from her class." Often she would ask us into the adjacent living room. Soon the penetrating smell of leather and glue would mingle with the aromatic scent of coffee. I was always given a big piece of cake. While the women were talking together, I snuggled on the old but really comfortable, green plush sofa and played with the cat. Sometimes I would return to the front of the shop and look at the things they sold there: shoe polish, shoe brushes, shoestrings and shoehorns. A black-lacquered shoehorn made of metal mesmerized me.

"With this shoehorn I would be able to slip on my shoes easily and would never push them down in the back," I nudged my mother.

Mommy had been counting every penny for a long time already, but this seemed to her like a useful purchase. Proudly, I took home the shoehorn, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. It would accompany me for decades throughout the world and remind me of the Lubinskis whom I never saw again after that day.

It was in early November of 1938 when Mommy and I were on our way to Uncle Laczi. The small streets around the Schulterblatt seemed less bustling than usual. Was it only this cold

and stormy weather that cast such a gloomy, gray, and oppressive air on everything? I drew close to my mother, who tried to hold the open umbrella against the wind.

In the past few days many seats in school had remained empty. At first there were only rumors, but soon they turned into facts. Entire families had been arrested in their apartments at dawn and taken either to jails or internment camps. Because of their abrupt departures, people hardly had time to throw any clothes into their small suitcases. They had to leave behind everything they owned. In the evening, police had brought them in cars with bars on the windows to the Altona train station. There they were to board already waiting passenger trains. It was said that they were taken to the Polish border. No information concerning their whereabouts was available<sup>24</sup>. All of the people arrested had been Jews with Polish citizenship. Most of them had been living in Hamburg for a very long time, had married and settled down here, had had their children, and had felt at home.

I had overheard the comments of a friend of my parents: "The worst is behind us now. Hitler got what he wanted. Things will get better, you'll see."

Would Hitler leave us German Jews alone from now on?<sup>25</sup>

I had walked next to my mother all along and had not paid attention to the surroundings when my mother suddenly stopped. We had reached the cobbler shop. People were standing on the steps leading down to the entrance.

The door was wide open, the shop pretty much cleared out. The clients had probably let themselves in and picked up their shoes. My mother went past the workshop into the living room. The usually cozy room with its old-fashioned furniture looked very messy.

A fat woman stood in front of the green plush sofa and scolded: "These scoundrels, this Jewish rabble. It's about time we got rid of them. Let's hope the rest of them will follow soon." - "*Heil Hitler!*" she added in a strident voice and left with her head high up in the air.

"There is nothing we can do about it anyway," an old man said, clearing his way to leave. "It's best to ignore all this. I'm so old and my doctor says I should avoid excitement."

"I feel sorry for the Lubinskis," a young women added, "but our Führer certainly knows what's right. Besides, they'll be properly accommodated where they really belong. Their place

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<sup>24</sup> Polish border troops refused entry to expelled citizens for quite some time. Meanwhile people had to camp outside in no-man's-land between Germany and Poland in the cold and without food.

<sup>25</sup> For a long time many patriotic German Jews could not believe that Nazi anti-semitism was directed against every Jew and not solely against Jews from Poland and Lithuania. After all, during World War I (1914 - 1918) over 100,000 German Jews fought at the front for Germany.

here wasn't that great either," she concluded and let her eyes wander around the modest basement apartment.

"No, Ingeborg," a person next to her intervened agitatedly, "I believe our Führer doesn't know what's going on here. He would not have wanted that. These are simply excesses of the police. When a stamp is missing on some paper, they don't waste their time beating around the bush!"

"Exactly right, they'll stop beating around the bush with all of us sooner or later," mumbled an obviously drunken man, "It will get much worse. This will end in war and we are not going to win this one either."

A woman pulled at his coat and chided him in a hushed voice: "Georg, be quiet and let's go already! You're talking so much nonsense! You'll lead us all to disaster."

"I better not have heard any of that." There was suddenly this piercing voice from among the crowd, and a young man left the workshop with brazen steps.

Mommy had turned pale and went out to the street. When she saw the tears in my eyes, she hugged me and whispered: "You don't have to be afraid, Gert. Sure, it's terrible, but Papa and I will find a solution. You and Ilse can rely on us, completely!"

I knew how capable and energetic my mother was, but was she really strong enough for a situation like this? With a reassuring pat she nudged me into Uncle Laczi's store, and already I felt somewhat comforted. But then I remembered the little cat from the cobbler workshop. What had happened to her? Perhaps someone had taken pity on her? She was only an animal, after all, and not Jewish.

## IT'S GETTING SERIOUS

November 10th started out like any other day: After Mommy had awakened me, I got ready for school. Ilse was in the bathroom, Mommy prepared breakfast, and Papa was still in bed. When the telephone rang I answered: "Koppel speaking." Who would call us at such an early hour?

"This is Aunt Bertel speaking," said a breathless voice. "Gertchen, are people in your apartment? Just say yes or no."

"What people?" I asked perplexed, but did not get any answer. I handed the receiver to my mother who was already standing next to me. Mommy listened carefully all the while her face turned increasingly gray. After she had put down the receiver, her hands shaking, she rushed over to my father in the bedroom.

"That was Bertel. The Gestapo has just taken Uncle Bruno away. She doesn't know what will happen with him. Other Jewish men in her building were picked up as well. You have to hide immediately."

Papa got up, turned on the radio and right away we heard a loud, unpleasant voice: "This murder will not remain unpunished! The Reich's government will try its best to keep up order, but the people's wrath can only be restrained with the utmost difficulty."

More spiteful voices followed cursing all the Jews in the world, but especially the German Jews and hurling terrible threats at them.

"Papa, what's going on?" I asked anxiously.

"Everything probably started with seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynspan, a Jewish boy from Hanover, shooting Ernst Eduard vom Rath, the Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris," my father explained. "Grynspan testified in Paris that his parents and brothers and sisters had been transported to Poland in the most brutal way at the end of October, together with many other Jewish-Polish fellow sufferers. In protest and in order to bring the world's attention to this terrible injustice the boy carried out the shooting in the German Embassy two days ago. Herschel Grynspan was arrested immediately by the French police. Unfortunately, Mister vom Rath died yesterday."

Papa was silent for a moment and then he continued, troubled: "It seems to me that they are going to hold us responsible for this."

"Us - responsible...?" Ilse and I said as one, indignantly. "Why is this our fault?"

Papa was at a loss to answer and Mommy only shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll make a few phone calls for a start," she then said. She called some family members to warn them. Some were already informed, had heard about the arrests, others were as in the dark as we had been.

Now decisions had to be made. My father said in his calm manner: "I think the kids should go to school. They are in the best care over there. The Gestapo seems to look for adult men only, and Gert is only eleven years old."

"And what about you? What will you do?" Ilse lamented and clung to my father.

"I know how to take care of myself, an old soldier like me. I survived the trenches and I'll overcome this situation as well. Give me a kiss, you two, and off you go. But be careful and don't forget: First think, then act!"

I decided it would be wise not to pass through the dangerous Rutschbahn, but to make a detour. It was twice as long but the streets seemed safer to me. A crowd had gathered around the synagogue on Bornplatz. I could not see what was going on and had to hurry so I would not arrive too late for school. For once I went in through the main entrance which was closer but in fact was reserved for the teachers.

"Unusual circumstances demand unusual acts!" Papa had said to me once and that was certainly right for today.

As soon as I passed through the door and felt myself in safety, I breathed a big sigh of relief.

Nearly all the students were here. Once again my father had been right. I heard from other classmates who had dared to take the usual way that the little synagogue in the Rutschbahn had been devastated. Others, who had gone directly by the main synagogue on Bornplatz, reported that prayer books and *Torah* scrolls, mountains of them, were lying on the streets in the dirt. They had been cut to pieces, trampled upon, and finally set on fire. Everything was ablaze and apparently the inside of the synagogue had also been ignited because smoke was coming out of the smashed windows. Some of the children were unable to keep back their tears while narrating.

In spite of all these awful stories, our teacher started the lesson. We had English with 'Little' whose real name was Mister Klein. Suddenly we heard extremely loud noises. Heavy steps thudded through the hallway, the door was flung open, and without knocking a man looked briefly inside the room and disappeared without a word. Erich, who sat next to the window, murmured: "Looks like Gestapo." Mister Klein put his finger on his lips.

"Shall I close the door?" Wolf asked in a voice hardly audible from his seat close to the door. Mister Klein only shook his head. The dreaded and infamous Gestapo was in our school. We heard them going up and down the corridors. From time to time somebody would look into our classroom without saying anything. Erich reported silently what he saw from his seat: "There is Gestapo in front of every entrance. Nobody is allowed in or out."

In the corridor we saw students from higher grades passing by. Their lips were pressed together. Fear was in their eyes. One vomited right in front of the open door. Then he went on.

"This is a pigsty!" a rude voice yelled. Then the voice reached our classroom. "To the gym, right away!" it ordered and a finger pointed at Mister Klein.

Mister Klein packed his books carefully without haste. He then turned calmly to the class: "Read page 34 in your English books and please, be quiet until I return."

Without adding anything, he walked out of the classroom. Behind him marched a Gestapo man hissing something about "insolent Jews." Now we had seen another side of 'Little' whom we had often laughed at. We took out our books and started reading on page 34 as Mister Klein had asked us to. I did not understand much of the text. The letters were jumping in front of my eyes.

As always, some teachers were monitoring the hallway. The door was still open. Paul had a good vantage point. He informed us about what was going on outside. "The Gestapo has lists," he whispered. His report went from ear to ear. "Apparently they arrest the teachers and some of the older students," was the next news.

Dr. Jacobsen was supervising our corridor. We called him "Jola" and he was a particularly popular teacher. He had published a terrific book of German, Yiddish, and Hebrew songs. Music was his passion. He would have preferred to sing with his students all day long. He was just going past our door when a man in leather coat asked him something. The man then briefly looked into his list, gripped Dr. Jacobsen's arm right away and pulled him out of sight toward the stairway.

"Now they took 'Jola,'" Paul said. I choked up and looked in vain for my handkerchief, which I apparently had forgotten in the morning rush. My neighbor to the left silently moved a fresh white handkerchief across the bench to me.

Then somebody entered the classroom and said: "You can go home. School is closed."

On the way home I had a strange feeling. At this time of the day I was always in school. Were people turning their heads to look at me? Nobody paid attention, though. Housewives did

their errands, small children played on the street, two old men walked up and down smoking their pipes. Trucks brought goods to the stores. Inside, I saw people whose faces I knew well and who were doing their usual jobs. Two dogs bit each other and a woman scolded them.

Everything is completely normal, I thought, except for us!

Then I passed Hirsch's candy store. The windows were smashed, broken glass was all over the place. In front of all this, SA men were standing in their brown uniforms with black knee-high boots and black-white-red swastika-armbands around their right arms. It was not as if they had passed by accidentally. A crowd had gathered along the sidewalk. Some seemed upset. On the opposite side of the street a group of Nazis approached. They stopped in front of a small knitwear shop. It belonged to the Cohns who were also Jewish. I had gone with my mother to their shop many times.

Two SA men smashed both windows with iron bars, which they had brought along. Then they threw out everything they could find inside the store. Colorful wool, knitting needles, patterns and some clothes piled up on the dirty and wet street. An elderly woman picked up a skein of wool and furtively pushed it into her bag. One SA man gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder: "Just take it, Mother," he said amused. "This swinish mob has made enough money from you over the years." When she passed me, she murmured to me confidentially: "I'll return this later to Mrs. Cohn." I nodded absentmindedly. I would not have bet my life on it.

I wanted to get home as fast as possible and accelerated my pace. "Take your time, you won't reach school in time anyway!" somebody called after me. What did he know! Still, I walked slower now so as not to attract attention.

Near the entrance I bumped into Ilse. We ran up the stairs. Mommy opened the door, Papa was nowhere to be seen.

"Papa is in the attic," Mommy said in a low voice stroking through our hair. "He'll have to stay there for the time being."

We lived on the top floor, which made it easy to reach the attic from our apartment unobserved. There were small storage rooms. Every tenant had one, but for some reason we had two. The neighbors did not know this. We had always been very pleased to have this extra room where we could store our suitcases and all kinds of old stuff. The doors could be locked from the inside and the outside.

When Ilse and I were still small and would behave really badly at times, Mommy threatened to lock us inside these rooms. They had no light. In the summer they got terribly hot, in the fall and winter, cold and drafty. Mommy never followed up on her threat.

"We agreed on a secret signal," Mommy revealed, "Papa only opens if I use it when knocking at the door. I'll get him now. Poor man, he has been sitting there for quite some time. He needs to get warm and eat. One of you should watch from the window to see whether the Gestapo is coming. If you see something, let us know immediately so there will be time enough for Papa to disappear."

I was deeply impressed by my parents' resourcefulness. I would not have believed them capable of coming up with such ideas. Normally only we children would use such secret signals in our games. But this was no game. After what I had seen and experienced this morning I knew it was dead serious.

Ilse went to the alcove window to watch the street. As soon as Papa was back in the apartment my mother prepared an aromatic filtered coffee, which obviously did Papa a world of good. He had been very cold. In the morning he had not even had time to shave. He made good on that after the meal. Then he stretched out on the sofa and immediately fell asleep.

## A TERRIBLE NIGHT

The day seemed endless. In the afternoon it started raining and darkness set in early. Papa lay on the sofa. Mommy, Ilse and I took turns sitting at the window and stared intensely outside. I already had a headache, and everybody else looked tired too. But for Papa we would have gladly done more. He should save his energy and rest. Who knew what was still in store for him?

In the evening, Inge, our "half-Aryan" cousin, had called to announce her visit. She absolutely wanted to come over, since Papa was her favorite uncle. Twenty minutes later she was sitting at our table.

"I'm not afraid. They can't do anything to me," she said defiantly. Her voice did not sound as courageous as her words. But she had made up her mind to help Papa.

Meanwhile it had gotten very late, and Mommy kept glancing at the clock on the wall. I understood the hint and promised: "I'll take over the watch one more time, then I'll go to sleep." Mommy nodded with relief and stroked my head. That same moment I sat in her lap like a little boy and clung to her. I had not done this for a long time. Nobody made fun of me, and Mommy caressed me until I got up and returned to my observation post.

Less than ten minutes had passed, when all of a sudden a big dark car approached from the left and parked right under the street light in front of our house. Two men in long dark leather coats got out and went straight to the entrance.

"They are coming!" I wanted to call out, but there was nothing much to hear. My voice failed from excitement. "Two men in leather coats just entered the building," I stammered, a little louder this time.

Papa got up immediately. Calmly he emptied the ashtray's contents into a bag, which he put into his pocket together with the cigarettes. He reached for his thick sweater, Mommy gave him his coat, and he was out of the door and had disappeared into the attic in an instant. We hurried back to the window. Inge had confirmed that it was impossible to see us from the street. Lit by the street light, the car, black and menacing, was still there. Perhaps this was not Gestapo at all, only harmless visitors?

Minutes went by. Then the two men suddenly reappeared, not alone, though. They led another man between them. I clearly recognized his figure: it was Mister Benschoter from the ground floor. The men pushed him rudely into the car and returned to the entrance. Again it

took some time until they came outside again. This time Mister Herz from the second floor walked between them and was shoved into the car.

Both Mister Herz and Mister Benscher were Jewish tenants. Now they would come to us to fetch Papa. They would not find him, but we had already heard what would happen then: If the Gestapo men did not find the person they looked for, SA men would arrive. The Gestapo would leave and the SA would go into action. They usually brought along clubs and crowbars. First, the furniture would be demolished. Pictures would be torn off the walls, pillows, blankets, bedclothes cut up with sharp knives, dishes thrown on the floor in stacks, photos torn up, silver, jewelry and clothing simply flung out of the window. One was lucky if a club or bar did not hit one's head "accidentally". All the while heinous utterances and curses were shouted. Then, when everything was destroyed, the nightmare would end.

It always took place in a systematic way and very fast. Later the newspapers would write about the "spontaneous people's wrath" which "in isolated instances cannot be controlled." I had already seen the effects of the "people's wrath" today.

On the radio the "punishment for the treacherous murder of Ernst vom Rath" was demanded incessantly. "The assassin Grynspan was a weapon in the hands of the vile world Jewry, doubtless supported by the Jews of the German *Reich* ... Ungrateful and perfidious is this Jewish race that exploits our hospitality for too long already. We finally have to liberate ourselves from them. The Jews have to go away, away, away. Only then will things get better and the German people will be able to grow...."

All broadcasts ended like this. Everybody heard them and many believed what they heard.

I had Mr. Lubinski's empty workshop before my eyes, and it was entirely clear to me who distorted the truth.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I nearly missed the car's departure. "They're leaving. They are gone!" I rejoiced as the car disappeared in the darkness.

Mommy brought Papa out of the drafty hideout. Completely at a loss, we sat silently around the table until Inge finally said: "Uncle John, it can't go on like this. You have to go somewhere else."

"Yes, but where?" We all said at once.

"To our place wouldn't make sense," Inge contemplated aloud. "We live at Grandma's. She is also Jewish. They might get you there too. We have to call Erna. Certainly you can stay there for a couple of nights."

Erna and Gusch, the faithfuls! In the commotion nobody had thought about them. Inge was already on the phone. Unfortunately no one answered at the other end. She tried over and over again. Mommy's gaze finally reminded me that I had to go to bed although I felt completely awake.

Suddenly I was startled. Apparently I had fallen asleep after all. I heard noises in the hall. "I'll take Uncle John to Stellingen," I heard Inge say. "We don't want to miss the last train even though Erna and Gusch aren't home yet."

I jumped out of bed, but the door had already closed behind the two of them. Inge had walked ahead to see if things were quiet, and Papa had followed her at the agreed upon distance. From the alcove window we saw them on the street a short while later. They walked in a tight embrace and seemed preoccupied with each other.

"Looks like a pair of lovers," Ilse said slightly annoyed.

"It's supposed to," Mommy said with a smile, "that way they'll be less conspicuous." They seemed to have thought about each and every detail.

Inge came to our apartment the following morning. She was in an excellent mood.

"What an adventure!" she recounted. "Gusch and Erna had been out dancing. They don't go often but when they go they stay late and enjoy it. In Stellingen we walked around, went all the way up to the entrance of the Hagenbeck zoo and back. When we felt too cold we waited in a doorway. Whenever somebody passed by..." Inge was shaking with laughter, "... I would cling to Uncle John and he actually kissed me a few times."

My cousin turned to Mommy and asked: "Aunt Magda, you aren't jealous, are you?"

Mommy laughed and hugged her. "You only did your duty," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Without some fun at the funeral nobody will come," Ilse remarked somewhat tartly and Mommy added dreamily: "I know my John. I can depend on him."

In the meantime Inge had become serious again and continued: "Finally, around two o'clock, Erna and her husband returned home on foot. They had been drinking quite a bit and couldn't get over this unusual visit at such an hour. Gusch was pretty much out of it and joked all the time, 'Hey, probably skipped out, the two of you? I'll take you to Cuxhaven; a ship leaves

from there to America tomorrow. Oh man, I'll also ditch the old lady. Don't you have a girlfriend for me, Inge?"

Inside the apartment John explained the situation. Gusch turned sober right away and stopped laughing. 'You stay here, no question about it,' he decided. 'Erna will get you a cup of tea first of all. And I'll take Inge home. Such a young girl shouldn't be out on the street all alone at two o'clock in the morning.' Well, and then Gusch walked me home." Inge ended her report.

Even though the situation was extremely serious, I could not help but ask my cousin: "Did you also hug and kiss Gusch?" Ilse gave me a smack, and Mommy shook her finger at me.

The phone rang and I quickly went to answer. It was Erna. "Gertchen," she said briefly, "please say thank you for me to Mommy for the nice present she sent us. We really have good use for it and we'll handle it very carefully." Then she hung up.

That much I knew: The Gestapo listened in on certain conversations, and therefore it was good to be cautious. I had understood what she meant. I felt relieved and passed on the encoded message to the others.

## AWAY, JUST AWAY!

On the evening of November 15, Papa finally returned home.

"For the time being the action is discontinued," he reported, "but nobody knows for how long. This government comes up with something new every day. Now we are also expected to pay for the damages the SA and their followers caused on November 10. There is practically no work we are still allowed to do. These bandits won't rest until they've reached their goal!"

"Which goal?" I asked anxiously.

"To kill all of us!" Ilse replied in a tough voice.

"Uncle Herbert was the clever one after all," Mommy stated in despair.

"This insight is not going to help us now," Papa said. "We certainly won't knuckle under that fast. For all the kindness of Erna and Gusch, I'm glad to be back here with all of you. We are greatly obliged to them, they've taken some risks. From tomorrow on we'll put all our energy into taking care of our future. Right now I'd like to go to my own bed."

A couple of days later I went back to school.

Everything seemed changed, although the building still looked the same. But where were the laughter and the noise that used to fill the schoolyard? Earlier on we had felt good and safe here. Now we sat muted and depressed at our desks and furtively kept an eye on the door. There were empty places everywhere. We had no news from our friends who had been deported to Poland. Many of my classmates were still waiting in vain for their arrested fathers to return. It had become chilly and we heard dreadful stories from the concentration camps. Most of our teachers were gone, and we suddenly realized how much they meant to us.

One day, two of our teachers, Klein and B.S.Jacobsohn stood in front of us again. B.S. was hardly recognizable. He never had been an imposing man but now he seemed his own shadow: incredibly thin and fragile, without his goatee, and with a shaved head.

"What did they do to him?" Erich whispered in my ear, horrified. Before I could answer Mr. Jacobsohn began to speak. His otherwise vibrant voice sounded thick and husky:

"I know that you wonder about my appearance. I did change, indeed. But my hair will grow back and soon an attractive goatee will adorn my face. Please, don't ask any questions! I can only tell you that I had a good time. It was great to have a vacation from you. My limping is the result of a little accident at home: For once I tried to help my wife in the kitchen."

B.S. even managed to smile.

Silently we stared at our teacher. Of course, we did not believe him, not one single word. It was known that prisoners, upon their release from concentration camp were cautioned: "One negative word about your stay here and you'll visit us again soon. Then, however, you'll return to your families only as ashes in a cigar box. Understood?" Everybody had understood.

In mid-December Uncle Bruno had returned to Aunt Bertel. When I saw my uncle he seemed a different man. Like a stranger he sat stiffly at the table, hardly talked, simply stared straight ahead without noticing his surroundings. He repeatedly sniffed noisily. As prisoner in a concentration camp he did not have handkerchiefs at his disposal and sniffing had become a compulsive habit. I knew Uncle Bruno only as an elegant, well-groomed man with exquisite manners. This man with the shorn head seemed to be someone else.

Mr. Herz from the second floor was back too. This towering man - he was over six feet tall - now walked on crutches with the utmost difficulty. Although it was forbidden to talk about the activities in the concentration camps, little by little we learned what had happened to him. In the concentration camp they had roll calls<sup>26</sup> for hours on end during which the captives had to stand outside in the dreadful cold, dressed only in thin prisoners' garment. Mr. Herz' imposing height annoyed the SS guards a great deal. They hit his legs repeatedly with canes yelling: "You Jewish pig, you are too tall. But we'll make short work of you."

The Herz family emigrated shortly thereafter. Apparently they had managed to get entry visas to Honduras.

Suddenly a new term was circulating all over. At relatives', friends' and at school there was talk of the *Kindertransport*. Our parents began to consider this option and explained to us what it was all about:

Shortly after the terrible events in November, numerous countries had simultaneously decided to offer asylum<sup>27</sup> to thousands of children from Germany. The parents, however, would never get visas.

*Kindertransport* therefore meant separation from parents for an unknown period of time, a journey into uncertainty, to foreign countries where nobody spoke German. There was no way I would join a *Kindertransport*. I wanted to emigrate together with my whole family. For

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<sup>26</sup> Before and after long periods of labor, all prisoners had to line up to be counted. All corpses had to be brought for roll call as well. The tiniest movement was punished with caning which many did not survive.

<sup>27</sup> In 1938 President Roosevelt of the United States initiated a world conference on refugees which took place in Evian at Lake Geneva. Germany did not participate. The results were disappointing: Only a few countries, Belgium among them, were ready to take in Jewish children. No agreement could be reached about further help for Jews.

months we had talked of nothing else. But where should we go? No country opened its doors. Obviously nobody wanted us. One day I discovered a container<sup>28</sup> on the street marked "Destination Guayaquil, Ecuador." Excited, I ran home and asked Papa: "Did you already inquire about a visa to this country?" Papa shook his head sadly.

In order to leave together, we not only needed papers but first and foremost we needed money<sup>29</sup>. We did not have either. I had already listened to many discussions about financing options and had suggested ideas myself:

"You might get 500 Marks for your beautiful bedroom set, perhaps for your dining room as well, less for the study, but for the living room...." - "You can sell my bicycle and Ilse's too. Will that be enough for the visa?"

Incessantly I wrote new figures into a notebook specially dedicated to calculating the amount necessary to emigrate.

Papa had heard it was sometimes possible to bribe Secretaries at Latin American consulates. That did not work out for him, though.

At some point Mr. Treder appeared. We had placed an ad in the paper, and he was interested in part of our furniture. Many years ago Mr. Treder had lived in Australia and told us about it. He pretended to have special relations to this country. He wanted to try to get a visa for us. Right away plans were made: allegedly, glove manufacturers were in great demand in Australia.

With enthusiasm Mommy started to learn glove making. We helped her as much as we could. I was allowed to punch holes into the soft leather with special clippers. I imagined all of us in Australia manufacturing wonderful gloves from kangaroo leather.

Obviously we still needed quite a lot more money for the visa. The only thing Mommy had left was a small diamond, which she wore as a pendant around her neck. I knew how attached she was to this piece of jewelry, but it had to be sold. With the proceeds Mr. Treder would try his best. He already had sent for part of the furniture, and we also had entrusted him with Pisi, my beloved parakeet. On leaving the country, domestic animals could not be brought along, anyway<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> These were huge crates into which a household's entire furnishings were packed. One could watch as they were loaded, nailed shut, and then hoisted onto the trucks. Usually the name of the immigrant and the "exotic" destination (Montevideo, Shanghai, Caracas) were written on the outside of the container.

<sup>29</sup> Jews had no way to earn money because they were not permitted to work, leaving many unable to emigrate simply because they lacked the necessary financial resources.

<sup>30</sup> Later on, Jews in the German Reich were even forbidden to keep pets.

After months of anxious waiting we got a negative reply from Australia. The money was gone. Mr. Treder did not show up anymore. He had not paid for the furniture either. Another ray of hope gone. Wouldn't anybody give us a chance?<sup>31</sup>

It was mid-January. I had just returned from school when the mailman rang to bring us a registered letter.

With shaking hands Mommy tore open the envelope and glanced over the letter. Then she dropped into the nearest chair and broke into tears.

Stunned, Ilse and I were standing in front of her and did not dare to inquire about the letter's contents. At this moment Papa entered. He grabbed the letter, glanced at it and handed it to Ilse.

"Read for yourself," he said, "or better yet, read it out loud. Gert should hear it too." The letter was from Uncle Gerhard Stoppelmann and Aunt Edith, Papa's sister. Although Gerhard Stoppelmann and his parents had been born in Hamburg they carried Dutch citizenship. This had enabled them to settle in Belgium without any difficulty a few years ago.

The letter was addressed to my parents. Ilse read hesitantly: "We have finally managed to obtain entry permits for Ilse and Gert. We enclose these important documents from Brussels. You have to take it to the Belgian consulate, which will grant visas to your children. We are looking forward to having the children with us, and we will try hard to make them feel at home. Unfortunately, I repeat, unfortunately, we cannot do anything for the two of you right now. At this point, Trudel, Edith, and I have exhausted all possibilities. A petition to the King is still pending, but he receives thousands of them. We do not expect very much. A Belgian friend wants to try to see the Queen Mother Elizabeth personally in this matter. He has petitioned for an audience with her. We try everything, absolutely everything. Send the children right away. Then you will be able to take care of your own emigration unencumbered. Do not delay! We are awaiting the children with love and joy!"

I was confused and looked at Mommy who was smiling at me now through her tears.

"In any case we'll know where you are." Papa tried to cheer us up, but there was such sadness in his voice that Ilse started to cry immediately.

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<sup>31</sup> Foreign countries developed more and more ways to avoid having to take in Jews. In Palestine there were Arab riots against Jewish immigrants. Frequently, ships loaded with Jewish refugees were turned away when they tried to sail into port.

That was more than I could take. Tears welled from my eyes and I cried as I had not cried for a long time. All the anxiety, anger, and bitterness of the last months formed one long stream of tears. I screamed hysterically; I was inconsolable: "I won't go away! No, I won't go! I want to stay with you! Why did you wait for so long? Everybody else left a long time ago. Why are we the only ones left who didn't emigrate?"

Ranting and raving, I lay on the floor. I pushed Ilse away with my foot when she tried to caress me. Amidst all this screaming I had not realized that Aunt Lieschen, my favorite aunt and Mommy's sister, had entered.

She immediately sensed the situation: "Only one thing can help! Get me some sugar water!"

Ilse came with a big glass.

"OK, Gert," Aunt Lieschen instructed, "you'll drink this now. Sugar water always helps!"

While I gulped it down, my aunt watched me, pleased with my cooperation, and told me to come into the living room with her.

"I'd like to have a moment with him alone, please!" she asked my parents. For fifteen minutes she buttonholed me, and at first I did not get to utter one single word. She displayed understanding for me, but also explained to me the imperatives of the situation. There was simply nothing to discuss--- only to accept.

The following day we made an appointment with the consul. Now only the visa had to be stamped into our passports, which already displayed the big, red *J* on the first page. Even abroad we were therefore easily recognizable as Jews. A reentry into Germany with such a passport would have led directly to a concentration camp.

"There is no coming back for you," a clerk at the passport office had commented coldly to make sure we understood.

"Who thinks of coming back?" Ilse had whispered to me angrily. "We want to get away, just away!"

The consul, a polite but taciturn man, handed my parents a form. "Would you please sign here, Monsieur, Madame," he asked. Papa was startled, Mommy again had red eyes, a frequent sight these days. Both were requested to promise in writing never to apply for an entry permit to Belgium in order to be reunited with their children. Our parents signed, but made no secret about the content. I felt a chill creeping inside me.

It was obvious that the consul was uncomfortable with the whole procedure. "I only follow the regulations. I have children myself, I am very sorry," he said embarrassed. Then he stamped the precious visas into our passports and signed.

As soon as we were outside on the street I asked bewildered: "Just why did you sign this?"

"Because we had no choice," Papa said. Mommy shook her head in despair.

"Will you keep this promise?" Ilse sobbed.

Papa hugged us tightly and whispered in a conspiratorial manner: "We will keep another promise, namely to somehow manage to be reunited."

## FAREWELLS

A short time before our departure Mommy broke her leg. Dr. Bohm ordered her to stay in bed, and she had to supervise our packing from there. Ilse proved herself as always when it came to practical matters. Instinctively, my sister had taken over the role of "surrogate mother" in the past weeks, and usually I obeyed her without arguing. How many fights, at times merciless, did we use to have. Once I had even pulled off the head of her doll in a rage.

It was good that we got so busy preparing and organizing things. There was no time left to mourn or to worry about the future. But in the evening in bed my heart became heavy with sorrow. I could not imagine a life without my parents.

A few days prior to our departure Mommy handed me my small, brown suitcase and said: "Walk around the apartment and pack everything you'd like to have as a keepsake, toys or things that are important to you. You may take whatever you wish, but it has to fit in the suitcase."

Here I was, having to decide for the first time in my life what was important to me.

This small, brown suitcase had been a present for my last birthday in Hamburg on December 21, 1938. Like always, my parents had invited the relatives who were still living in Hamburg. In the morning Erna had arrived with her traditional marzipan bread. Papa had given me the book *Father and Son* by e.o.plauen<sup>32</sup>.

"As *Father and Son* love each other, so your father loves you, my son!" he wrote inside as a dedication. Although money was scarce, Mommy had bought the little stuffed monkey I had always wanted.

I put my parents' gifts in the suitcase first. Next came the strong magnet, which Erich, my youngest uncle, had left behind - he had immigrated as a very young man to Spain. Naturally, I put in the shoehorn and the small box that Aunt Trudel had given me, which was intended for cuff links but where I kept all kinds of little treasures. Then I remembered Dr.Jacobsen's songbook.

I ran from room to room finding more and more things I was attached to. Of course, the suitcase was already full. It was much too small! I made some changes, taking things out, squeezing in something else. What torture! I wanted to cry. Had I picked the right things?

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<sup>32</sup> The famous *Father and Son* drawings were printed in the magazine *Berliner Illustrierte* in the thirties. The author and artist was Erich Ohser, who published under the pen name of e.o. plauen. Because of his political drawings, the Nazis banned him from publishing: later he was denounced, arrested, and in 1944, committed suicide in prison.

I thought about a saying of Mommy's: "Only people are important, they are irreplaceable! Everything else can be regained through work or is dispensable anyway."

Vigorously, I closed the case and locked it. Nobody should see what I had taken. Tears welled from my eyes and I flung myself on Mommy's bed to get some comfort from her.

"I'd like to tell you why your name is spelled with a hard 't' at the end," she said quietly. "We always liked the name Gerd, but I insisted it be written with a hard *t* at the end, Gert, because I wanted you to become a determined, dynamic, and strong boy!"

I stopped crying right away and stated: "I am already very strong!"

We had to get a permit for everything we took with us, even if its monetary value was negligible. While packing we made an exact inventory of the things we wanted to bring along. Then the list<sup>33</sup> had to be authorized by the tax office. We could expect the contents of our suitcases to be checked at the border against the items listed. New items were permitted only in exceptional cases and the need for them had to be explained.

The train to Belgium was scheduled to leave from Hamburg Central late in the evening. A few hours earlier all the relatives came to our house to bid us farewell. They were sitting in the living room. Ilse and I went from one person to the next, got hugs and kisses as well as advice and good wishes. In my excitement I could hardly listen. I would rather have done without this ceremony. I was determined not to cry, but when I said good-bye to my favorite cousin Inge, tears were running down my face.

Finally it was time to go. Mommy limped with us to the door. We kissed each other and could hardly tear ourselves away. With a gesture of resignation she pushed Papa and us out of the door. "Hurry up, you'll be late," she called after us when we were already at the stairway, just as she used to say every morning when we set out on our way to school.

Papa had secured us places in a sleeping car. We thought that was really exciting and were glad that the Nazis had apparently forgotten to prohibit this in addition to everything else<sup>34</sup>. He accompanied us to our compartment and explained to us at great length all the different handles, from the light switch to the heating.

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<sup>33</sup> Even the smallest item of clothing had to be approved by the tax office: jewelry, silver, and other valuables were not allowed to be taken out of the country. The slightest deviation from the approved list in someone's luggage could result in terrible consequences such as cancellation of the exit permit or even deportation to a concentration camp.

<sup>34</sup> A short time later, Jews were not allowed to use sleeping cars or dining cars during a train ride.

"This is the emergency brake, Gert," he said with a twinkle. "You better not pull it. There are plenty of other handles to try out!"

"Ilse, don't start flirting with that conductor over there who looks like Santa Claus!" My sister just made a face.

A whistle blew. Papa gave the two of us a quick hug and jumped back onto the platform. The train was already pulling out. Papa waved with a handkerchief. From the window we saw his frame getting smaller. Then the station disappeared and it got cold and dark inside the compartment. We closed the window and lay down to sleep. The rhythmic clatter of the rolling wheels had a soothing effect. Only now did we realize how tired we were.

I awoke in the middle of the night. The train had come to a stop at a lit platform.

"We are in Cologne!" Ilse whispered, roused by voices from outside. "We have a stop of more than an hour!"

"Do you think we'll make it?" I asked anxiously. "Sure," Ilse encouraged me. We got dressed in no time, took our tickets, and got off the train. A short distance from the station, the Cologne Cathedral with its high spires loomed in the night sky, black and colossal. "We'll run around it full circle!" Ilse suggested and already we were running with throbbing hearts. The streets were empty and deserted. We heard the clatter of our own steps. It was eerie and at the same time pleasantly thrilling. I had seen illustrations of the Cathedral, but in real life it was much more impressive. It was raining and we were without an umbrella, but we did not mind.

"Back to the train!" Ilse ordered after we had completed the round. Breathless and soaked, we arrived in our compartment. We were proud of our enterprise: The other day we had been school children, today we were circling the Cologne Cathedral late at night all alone. As we were lying again in our beds we were astonished by our own courage.

In the early morning hours we reached Aachen. I feared customs and passport control but Ilse joked: "Don't worry. We'll tell the officers what they are allowed to ask!" Ilse sounded almost like Papa.

A conductor knocked and requested that we take our luggage and move to a regular compartment, as the sleeping car would be uncoupled.

Meanwhile it had begun to dawn. We took our suitcases and found a compartment with two vacant seats. We had just settled down when two uniformed officers appeared at the door.

"*Heil Hitler, passport control!*" They barked in a commanding tone. As soon as they saw the big *J* on our passports they ordered: "Out of here! You have to pass through the special control! The suitcases stay here!"

Our fellow passengers stared at us. Nobody said anything.

We were led along the long platform to a small house. Ilse lamented: "We have to be back in time for the train. Our aunt is waiting for us at the station in Antwerp!"

One officer smirked and snapped at her: "That's not going to happen, the train leaves soon. Do you imagine it'll wait especially for you two?"

Inside the house we were led into two different rooms. A tight-lipped, female officer received Ilse. Turning to me the hostile officer said: "Take off your left shoe!" In my excitement I took off the right one. "Haven't you learned where's left and right?" he barked. "You Jews only count money all day long, so it's not necessary for you to know where's left and right!"

I did not utter a word, and suddenly this uniformed guy seemed to have lost his interest in me. "You can go!" he grumbled. A few minutes later Ilse came out of the other room.

"I had to take off almost all my clothes," she told me. "They felt around all the seams looking for jewelry. I said we had already sold or handed over everything, so there was really nothing to look for. At this point I was allowed to put my clothes back on."

The female officer came outside with our passports and returned them to us without any comment.

"Oh boy! Gert, our train is still here!" Ilse screamed all of a sudden. "Run as fast as you can!"

We sped up and jumped on the steps of the last car just in time. By the time we opened the door the train was already moving.

Ilse wanted to return immediately to our compartment, but I grabbed her by the arm. "Not yet!" I said with such determination that Ilse stopped. "Just what are you doing back here?" she asked, puzzled.

I pulled her to the car's back window and watched the train tracks. Slowly the station disappeared, then the suburbs, finally there were only scattered houses and fields to be seen. To the left a road ran beside the train tracks...

Like in a movie, pictures and scenes from the past appeared before my eyes. Ilse stood next to me and also seemed lost in thought. The train was now moving at a slow pace.

"Ilse," I called and tapped her back, "the barrier, the border..."

Soldiers with guns guarded the border. The train advanced snail-like. Another barrier appeared. Guards in uniforms I had never seen before stood there. They had no guns. From a small house, a black, gold and red banner fluttered in the wind. The signs 'Royaume de Belgique' and 'Koninkrijk België' let us know in French and Flemish that we had left Germany and the Nazis behind. We were safe. I raised my right hand and drew three times a big *X* in the air - in the direction of Germany.

"What kind of hocus-pocus is that supposed to be?" my sister asked in astonishment.

I had read once in an adventure book, that this was the sign to cross out all evil, so that it would never be able to reach you. I was not afraid anymore nor was I ashamed of my superstitions. "Once our parents are out of this Nazi country, everybody there can go to hell!" I said with a trembling voice and clenched my fists. I had left behind for good the country that had once been my home and the home of my ancestors. Determined, I turned around and went back to the compartment with my head up. We were free, but what would the future have in store for us?

## OUTBREAK OF THE STORM

### (Summer 1939 - Summer 1942)

On September 1, 1939, Hitler attacked Poland and unleashed World War II.

Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. The United States and Japan remained neutral at first.

In 1919 Belgium had entered a defense alliance with France after World War I. King Leopold III preferred his country to be neutral and dissolved the alliance in 1936.

On January 10, 1940, a German paratrooper who had gone astray in the fog had to execute an emergency landing in Mechelen, Belgium. On board were the secret plans for an attack on the West to take place seven days later on January 17. The Belgian military authorities captured the plans along with the paratrooper, and the Nazis had to postpone their invasion.

After German troops had entered Norway through Denmark on April 9 and had occupied the ports, Hitler started his offensive against the West in the early morning of May 10, 1940. Belgium, Luxembourg, and Netherlands were bombed without a declaration of war despite their neutrality. Belgium reacted by arresting all German men without distinguishing between Jews and Nazis. All of the men were transferred to the south of France and interned there. Right after the surrender of Belgium and France, the non-Jews returned to Germany. The Jews were initially kept in the Gurs camp. In 1942 they were delivered to the Germans and sent to extermination camps in Poland.

On May 14, 1940, Rotterdam was destroyed shortly before the surrender. On May 17, Brussels was occupied by units of the German *Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces) without a fight.

The British and French then approached from the opposite direction, but were slowed down by roads clogged with hundreds of thousands of refugees trying to get to the English Channel. The Germans reached the Channel coast swiftly. As a result, the Allies were trapped and had to flee through Dunkirk.

On May 27, 1940, the Belgian King requested a cease-fire against the will of his cabinet, which turned down surrender and formed a government in exile in France and later in London. Leopold III refused to flee to Great Britain and became a prisoner of war. On May 31, 1940, the parliament-in-exile declared him to be a traitor and deposed him.

Belgium was now under German military administration. The commander General von Falkenhausen was a soldier from the old guard and as such not particularly anti-Semitic. He did not see it as his task to exterminate Jews.

## ANTWERP

We returned to our compartment and found our suitcases untouched on the rack. Nobody had paid attention to them.

"Imagine what we could have taken, after all," I said to Ilse in a low voice, wistfully contemplating the much too small suitcase. Ilse just shrugged her shoulders.

"You must be pleased to be here with us now?" an amiable looking lady who sat in the same compartment greeted us. She offered us a bag of nuts. Only now did we notice the benevolent gazes of our fellow passengers.

"We were worried about you," a younger man said with a serious expression. Facing him sat a man with a party badge in his buttonhole. He avoided looking at the other people in the compartment and stared arrogantly out of the window.

The train stopped briefly. "Herstal," said the announcement and we had already moved on.

"*Mesdames, Messieurs, vos passeports s'il vous plaît!*" (Ladies and Gentlemen, your passports please!). A soft and pleasant voice came from the aisle and the next moment a Belgian officer stood inside our compartment. We handed him our passports. He glanced briefly at them and returned them with a friendly "*Merci Mademoiselle, Monsieur!*"

"He has called you *Monsieur*," giggled Ilse. "Yes, and *merci*, what does that mean?"

"That means thank you," explained the nice lady who had given us the nuts. "We are polite here in Belgium. To everybody!" She added with an edge in the direction of the party member, who got up abruptly, took his briefcase and left the compartment without a good-bye.

The lady winked at us, and then we started to have a really good time. Everybody talked to everybody else. We ate, drank, joked, and laughed. Unfortunately, I did not understand a single word.

When we arrived in Antwerp, everybody got off the train, as it was the last stop. There were many people standing on the platform, but I immediately caught sight of Grandma Koppel who had been living in Belgium since Grandpa had died. Next to her was Aunt Edith whom I did not remember very well. She was younger than Mommy and did not look like all the aunts I knew.

"First of all we have to take your suitcases to customs control!" Aunt Edith said after the welcome and walked briskly ahead. She spoke Flemish with the customs officers. It sounded similar to German but I could not understand it.

The officer did not even want to check our suitcases. He smiled kindly, opened a drawer, and gave me a piece of chocolate. "That's for you, sir!" he said, patting my back. "Merci," I replied quickly and Grandma said: "Well, that's already a start!" Everybody seemed very proud of me including myself. The officer had called me 'sir'!

In the evening Uncle Gerhard returned from the office. I had not seen him very many times before and I hardly recognized him. He was tall, slender, and very elegantly dressed. He, too, seemed to be much younger than my father.

Right during our first breakfast together, Uncle Gerhard let us know how much allowance he had decided to give to each of us. Ilse, already sixteen years old, was to receive 100 Belgian Francs monthly and I would receive twenty. That seemed a huge amount to me. We really had not expected anything at all. Papa had earned so little in recent years that an allowance had become inconceivable. Uncle Gerhard had more information in store for us: I would have one week before starting school. That was fine with me.

"So maybe I can visit Aunt Trudel, Tommy, and Fee tomorrow," I suggested.

"One thing at a time!" Uncle Gerhard slowed me down. "Aunt Edith will decide. Also, look at yourself. First of all, you had better get dressed." Apparently, it was not customary in this house to appear in pajamas for breakfast. Why hadn't he said so right away?

Aunt Edith and Uncle Gerhard did not have children themselves and did not really know how to deal with them. Their many visitors were always nice people who talked German among themselves, but did not hold much interest for a little boy from Hamburg. Aunt Edith would sometimes stroke my hair or put her arm around me when she felt that I was sad. Uncle Gerhard remained aloof. It would never have occurred to me to simply throw my arms around his neck and hug him. Only years later did I understand the burden this man had taken upon himself to help other people.

Luckily, Ilse was there. In the evening I always had to go to bed earlier than she did and I couldn't convince Uncle Gerhard otherwise. Usually Ilse would sit on the side of my bed and we would talk until I fell asleep.

"You spoil your brother," Aunt Edith said, shaking her head.

"Yes. He is old enough to go to bed by himself!" Uncle Gerhard agreed.

Ilse did not waver. "You are quite right," she said, "but first he needs to become familiar with his new surroundings. I like doing it."

The first day of school came, and I walked there by myself. Aunt Edith had pointed out the nearby school building to me a few days earlier. It was not a Jewish school. I thought about my much longer route to school in Hamburg, and how often I had hurried along the Rutschbahn, in fear of provocation and harassment. Here, nobody seemed to be afraid. The kids were laughing and playing.

Suddenly four older boys approached from the right. They were noisy and pushed each other. I looked for an escape but there was none. But they passed by without paying any attention to me, minding their own business. It would take months before I was able to walk to school as carefree as my classmates.

The first thing I had to do at school was to go to the main office. The secretary handed me a note with the number of my classroom written on it. I went down the hall, entered the room and stood right in front. Everybody stared at me, and I was glad when the teacher finally came in.

"You have arrived," he said in German in a friendly tone of voice. "Please, take your seat there." His German was so funny I could hardly hold back my laughter. I only managed to get out *Welbedankt, Mijnheer* (Thank you, sir) before I had already reached the limits of my Flemish.

During recess the kids ran around the yard and played tag and some type of dodgeball. When a ball flew in my direction I caught it and threw it back. A boy from my class came toward me and asked '*meespeelen?*' That could only mean whether I wanted to play with them. I nodded and right away was pushed to one side of the field and became part of the game.

School in Belgium bore no resemblance to my experiences in Germany. Nobody seemed to have ever heard of a ruler or a cane. Of course, the children were not model students either. Once our teacher became so angry about the outrageous remarks of one of my classmates that he even threatened to slap him.

"You wouldn't dare!" The boy answered with indignation. "My father is an auxiliary policeman. Just wait and see!"

At the beginning of our stay in Antwerp we had to get used to the fact that all doors were open to Jews. There were no signs announcing "Jews unwanted!"

For the first time I went together with my sister to the opera. We heard *Lohengrin* in Flemish. Even though our tickets were for the upper tier right under the roof, I enjoyed the performance thoroughly. As we had plenty of pocket money at our disposal, we went to the movies frequently and caught up on what we had missed when we were in Germany.

Besides music, books became my second passion. Often, Uncle Gerhard and Aunt Edith were out for the evening. Ilse was already allowed to go out too. Then I had to stay by myself. At first I felt a little uneasy alone in the big, silent apartment, but then I discovered the books: Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Emil Ludwig, Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Jakob Wassermann, Romain Rolland were some of the authors I devoured. I did not understand everything, but I was fascinated and read until late at night. The moment I would hear steps on the stairway I would quickly turn off the light.

Once Uncle Gerhard entered my room. I pretended to be asleep, but he touched the bulb of my reading lamp and burned his finger.

"I did the same thing at your age," I heard him say and he did not sound that angry. "Are you afraid of me?" he then asked.

"Yes," I answered hesitantly and braced myself for punishment. My uncle sat down next to me at my bed.

"I don't mind so much that you read until late as I mind that you pretend you don't. However, you don't have to be afraid of me. You should only promise me not to read after ten o'clock when we are out of the house."

I tried to comply.

We had many relatives in Antwerp we could visit. My Uncle Erich, Papa's youngest brother, had also come to Belgium. He had fought in Spain against Franco<sup>35</sup>. I felt very close to him because he was a lot like my father. Aunt Trudel lived with her three children in a very beautiful house and I liked to visit her best. Her warmth reminded me of Mommy.

I did not get to see Uncle Berthold anymore. He had gone to New York because he had been offered a position there. The owner of "Bernsteinlinie," the shipping company where he had worked, had been released from jail and had immigrated to America, leaving Uncle Berthold with nothing to do in Antwerp. Unfortunately, only he had received a permit to enter the United

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<sup>35</sup> In 1936 a Fascist rebellion, led by the army under General Francisco Franco, triggered a civil war in Spain which lasted until 1939. During this war, Hitler supported Franco. Franco and the Fascists won.

States because of his special know-how. Once again he had traveled ahead in order to work on entry permits for his family.

Kurt, Aunt Trudel's oldest son, was already fifteen years old. He had a very deep voice and seemed very grown-up. I looked up to him.

Fee had also changed. The crybaby had turned into a self-assured girl. Once, when we were alone, I reminded her: "I still owe you something." She gave me a searching look. "Hamburg, Central Train Station!" I said and quickly gave her a kiss. She turned red and ran away, but she was not mad at me.

Eight-year-old Tommy had become an enthusiastic soccer fan and tried to persuade me to play with his friends each time I visited there. I did not particularly like soccer, but I had become interested in swimming.

Uncle Gerhard tried all the time to get me more involved in sports. Although he accepted and appreciated that I was a bookworm, he still wanted me to have some balance in my life. He asked me about my swimming and I had to confess that there was nothing much to it. Uncle Gerhard made only the smallest disparaging remark; however, my ambition increased. I was suddenly embarrassed that I could not really swim yet.

"Ilse, I want to become a certified swimmer," I explained to my sister in the evening.

"I have nothing against it. Uncle Gerhard will certainly pay for your swimming lessons."

"But I want to surprise him."

Ilse got the point immediately and agreed to put the savings from her allowance at my disposal, so that I could take swimming lessons. In just one month I was able to put the free-style swimming certificate on my amazed uncle's desk. Approvingly, he patted my shoulder, and I felt I had gone up in his esteem.

Meanwhile I had found a good friend at school, who had caught my attention in the schoolyard. Even though he did not look Belgian, I addressed him in Flemish. He replied laughingly in German: "My name is Richard Wolff and I'm from Cologne. I came here on a *Kindertransport*." I liked him from the start. He was one year my senior and therefore a grade above me. However, we took to meeting each other every recess. He seemed to be a very special guy, and I was proud of this newfound friendship.

One day, when I returned from school, Peter and Renate Pollak from Hamburg were there. The Jewish Community had looked for a shelter for refugee children and Uncle Gerhard

had put them up at his parents. Peter also used to go to Talmud-Torah and I bombarded the two of them with questions about friends and acquaintances that had stayed behind.

"At the end the boys had to get out of Talmud-Torah and come to us to Karolinenstraße," Renate reported.

"Boys and girls together?" I asked astonished. "Does that work well?" I had never heard of such a thing.

"It worked out OK!" Renate said readily, but her brother made a face and muttered: "When the devil hungers, he will eat scraps."

I was very happy about Peter's arrival. Now I had someone to talk to about Hamburg. Once I suggested we go for a stroll through town and have ice cream. "Can you just do that?" he asked.

I was reminded of my first day at school in Antwerp, of the fear and insecurity, which had accompanied me even in Belgium for a long time. Peter had just arrived and probably gone through terrible experiences back in Hamburg.

"You can, Peter," I said simply and put my arm around his shoulders. I thought of the words of my teacher who had recently assured me: "All men have equal rights and duties. Nobody is better or worse than anyone else by birth. Everybody has to find out for himself what he can do with his life and how far he can get."

"Soon you'll feel very good here!" I said to Peter. "We adjusted very quickly, and Flemish isn't as difficult as you might think."

"If only my mother were here!" Peter sighed dreamily.

## MOMMY ARRIVES ... AND MUST LEAVE AGAIN

The train came to a halt, the doors opened, I yelled, "Here she is," and already I was in Mommy's arms.

The previous evening we had unexpectedly received a cable from Germany announcing my mother's departure from Hamburg and overnight visit for the following day. Now she was here, indeed, and we could not believe it. Even Uncle Gerhard had come to the station. He never interrupted his office hours, but that day he made an exception.

Mommy was on her way to England, and we did not know how this sudden trip had come about.

"I'll play house maid for a while," she told her speechless listeners. "Today this is nearly the only possibility to get to England<sup>36</sup>. I learned about it and immediately wrote to Mr. Harrington."

"Mr. Harrington - I never heard of him," Uncle Gerhard interjected. Mommy was amused: "Yes, this was before your time, Gerhard. Shortly before the First World War, I worked as a secretary for Mr. Harrington. He is an Englishman and had a business in Hamburg importing tea for all of Europe. When the war erupted in August of 1914, he happened to be in England on vacation with his family. For many years he was unable to return. During those years we were told that all English people were our enemies. To me he had always been a truly kind and patient employer. So I put the furniture from his office and his home in storage under my name so that it would not be confiscated as enemy possessions. Also, I packed all the important files and took them to our apartment. When the war was finally over, I wrote him that his possessions were at his disposal at any time.

A couple of years later Mr. and Mrs. Harrington came to Hamburg. Prior to his departure, I wanted to give him a small cash box, which I had been in charge of before the war. Six gold coins were inside. Mr. Harrington had completely forgotten about their existence. He insisted on giving me these coins which I naturally could not accept. In the end he took the box with him. Two days later I received a small parcel by mail."

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<sup>36</sup> Many countries would only admit people with certain specified professions, e.g. farmers in Central and South America or Canada, industrial or scientific specialists in Australia. In England domestics were scarce.

"Inside were the cash box with the gold coins," I beat my mother to the punch line, since I had often heard the story.

"Yes," said Mommy pensively, "and there was a little note: "For our dear, faithful Magda. With true gratitude from Mr. and Mrs. Harrington." The gold coins had great value during inflation<sup>37</sup>, as prices for everything were in the billions. We were able to get married and make some purchases."

Like always, this story really impressed the listeners. Mommy herself was moved.

"When I learned about visas for housemaids a few weeks ago, I remembered old Mr. Harrington from whom I hadn't heard in years. I contacted him, and imagine he answered immediately. He is over ninety and almost blind now. However, he has not only managed to obtain all the necessary papers through his daughter, but he also arranged a working contract for me with a friend of his. I then received the entry permit for England and the Belgians allowed a two-day visit as I'm only in transit here."

Mommy had spoken the last few words in a very low voice looking distressed at Ilse and me.

"First of all we'll have a nice meal together," Aunt Edith said quickly in order to chase off the sadness that was spreading. "Yes," Mommy pulled herself together, "we want to enjoy the short time we have." Aunt Edith had prepared a delicious meal.

"I am not going to return to the office for today," Uncle Gerhard said and lit a cigar. Then he asked Mommy: "What will happen with John?"

"He sends his best regards to all of you," Mommy answered. "It was a sad farewell. Everything happened so fast. John said now that the children are safe it wouldn't make sense to just sit together and wait in Hamburg for a miracle to happen. Once in England, I might be better able to help him get there too. Then the children could follow. He's the last of us in Hamburg. You know what he always says: 'I'll lock up the shop,' or 'The captain leaves the sinking ship last!'"

Mommy could not hold back any longer. Tears were running down her face.

My usually distant uncle got up and took his sister-in-law in his arms. "You can always rely on our help," he promised. "We'll do whatever is possible." He kept this promise.

Those two days passed much too quickly. I had stayed home from school so as not to miss a single moment with Mommy. In the evening all of us went with her to the ferry from Antwerp to Harwich. We accompanied Mommy onto the ship. I took her aside and asked her to

slip her hand into the breast pocket of my coat. There was the little monkey, my last birthday present from Mommy. "He is always with me, then I feel closer to you," I confessed to her.

Departure was any moment, the ship's horn was sounding, and black smoke poured from the smoke stack. We had to disembark. A hasty kiss, a last hug and the ship left the pier. We were still waving after the ferry had long disappeared in the rising fog.

"We'll meet again in a couple of months," Mommy had called to us confidently. I wanted to believe this. But it would be seven years until we would meet again.

When we arrived back home a surprise was waiting for each of us on our beds: a small album with pictures of our big family and of good friends and acquaintances. Many of them were already dispersed all over the world. Many of them would not be able to escape the Nazis. Many of them I never saw again.

## SNEAKING ACROSS THE BORDER

"The Second World War has started, the British consulates in Germany have been closed!" With this news Aunt Edith greeted us at the breakfast table.

Shocked, I looked at my sister and we said almost simultaneously: "Then Papa cannot get to England anymore."

We knew that his departure was imminent. Mommy had indeed been able to get him a job as a "butler." For us the notion that there were still butlers in England was inconceivable. Papa was sitting with his suitcases ready. Everything was arranged. He had an exit permit and he had a passport. He was just waiting for the entry permit, which was to arrive at the British consulate in Hamburg any day.

"Then he has to come here," I called in panic, "Belgium will remain neutral and he can go on from here."

"Uncle Gerhard looked up from his newspaper annoyed and just said: "Easy, young man!"

That was not what I wanted to hear right then. Exasperated, I ran out of the room and threw myself on the bed, sobbing. Ilse followed behind and tried to console me.

"Calm down, Gert. You know Uncle Gerhard means well. He is the best person in the world. You'll see, he will help if need be. He just can't take your screaming. He wants to think things through calmly."

"And I can't take him," I screamed. At the same time I knew that I was doing an injustice to my uncle.

A little later I got ready for school. On my way out, Uncle Gerhard silently stroked my hair.

Days were passing by.

On the weekend, around nine o'clock in the evening, we received an international call from Hamburg. Aunt Edith answered the phone and spoke very agitated with Papa. "I'll talk to your brother-in-law myself," she said in the end. Red splotches had appeared on her neck; for her a sure sign of great excitement. "We'll call you right back."

She was upset. "He doesn't want to give him the money!"

The situation was as follows: Papa wanted to get to Belgium and go on from there to England. But the Belgian consulate refused to give him an entry visa because of his previously signed promise never to enter Belgium. The Belgian consul let Papa know that he would be able to grant him a transit visa only if he could produce an English visa. This, however, was no longer possible to obtain in Germany. My father urgently asked for a permit that would allow him to stay for two to three days in Belgium. He promised to arrange for a visa to England immediately upon arrival in Belgium. The consul was not swayed: "I have to follow my government's regulations. You must understand my position." At this point, Papa just pointed to the big *J* in his passport.

Now Papa had decided to cross the German-Belgian border illegally. For this he needed two trustworthy guides, who in turn would cost money. Somebody with knowledge of the area would have to take him under cover of darkness from Aachen to the Belgian border. He had money ready for this. In Belgium he would need another guide, who would be paid later on in Belgian Francs, to avoid Belgian border control. Papa did not have any Belgian money. Besides, it was a capital offense to take foreign currency out of Germany.

Uncle Laczi was Papa's last hope. My uncle had sold his orthopedic supply store and as a Hungarian national was allowed to take the majority of his assets as well as furniture and family jewelry with him. He had been living in Hungary with his family for a few months. Papa had called him in Budapest and had asked him to transfer the needed amount to Belgium. Actually, his brother-in-law should have shown his gratitude by taking this opportunity to pay back my father for extending him help that had been crucial in selling his business. But Uncle Laczi refused.

Aunt Edith immediately placed a call to Budapest, and soon after we could hear her trying to buttonhole Uncle Laczi.

"Laczi, all of John's expenses will be on us once he is here. You know he is not allowed to work here. We already support the children, my in-laws, Renate and Peter Pollak, my older sister Tilly, her husband and children, and my brother Erich. All in all, thirteen people. I cannot expect even more from Gerhard. Now also cash, that's impossible. You've got to help!"

The answer was apparently brief, as was Aunt Edith's good-bye. She hung up, infuriated and pale. "He can't or doesn't want to," she announced.

At first Uncle Gerhard remained silent, then he said in his deliberate way: "Then we will pay for the guide!"

I wanted to jump up and throw my arms around my uncle's neck, but I knew that he did not appreciate such outbursts of emotion. Therefore I got up and simply squeezed his hand.

Uncle Gerhard and Aunt Edith helped wherever they could, but quietly without making a fuss over it. More and more refugees from Germany knocked at their door, looking for shelter for a couple of days, or selling something which would pay for their ongoing journey or simply for their daily livelihoods. Aunt Edith bought things she did not really need to support these people. Once, when winter was imminent, without a thought she offhandedly gave away Uncle Gerhard's almost new coat to a professor who had fled leaving all his possessions behind. When a few days later Uncle Gerhard wanted to wear the coat, Aunt Edith informed him that the coat had a new owner. Uncle Gerhard looked at her, shaking his head: "I guess you've done the right thing anyway," and got himself a new one.

For now he went to the phone to place a call to Hamburg.

"John, hello John," I heard him say. "We certainly do want to celebrate your birthday, everything is arranged. We are looking forward to a cheerful get-together. Everything is going as planned. So long!"

I had understood this encoded conversation<sup>37</sup>. If things went well, Papa would arrive within two or three days. If, however, border police caught him on either side, the consequences would be unpredictable.

The waiting was agonizing. We sat next to the telephone waiting anxiously for the call of deliverance.

Finally, it happened: "John, John," Aunt Edith shouted into the receiver, "where are you? In Eupen<sup>38</sup>. Great, I'll come and get you."

When Papa finally stood in front of me, I jumped up and clung to his neck and did not want to let go of him ever again. Overtired, but overjoyed, he freed himself from my embrace and dropped into a chair. After he got cleaned up and the apartment was filled with the scent of roasted coffee, he set out to tell about his adventures.

"At first everything worked well. I took the train to Aachen, and at the agreed upon meeting point, I immediately recognized the man who was supposed to help me."

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<sup>37</sup> Frequently telephone conversations were listened in on. Also letters to and from foreign countries were intercepted and censored. Passages deemed suspect to the censors were rendered unreadable. At times, the Gestapo interrogated the German sender or receiver.

<sup>38</sup> Eupen is a border town in Belgium that had been part of Germany prior to World War I. Most of the people were still German speaking.

"What did he look like?" I inquired in suspense.

"He looked like a farmer: peaked cap, loden jacket, rubber boots. He carried a crossword puzzle magazine under his arm, which was opened on page twenty-one as had been agreed. We rode briefly on a bus, then we walked. Meanwhile it had gotten dark but the man went ahead confidently, along dirt roads, paths and thick underbrush. At some point he stopped and whispered, 'we are in Belgium. I'll go back now. Keep walking straight ahead for another couple of hundred yards until you get to a crossroads. There you call out, in a low voice: 'Emma!' This is the code for the Belgian. He'll take you from there.' With this he turned around and disappeared. I continued, soon reached the crossroads and called out 'Emma, Emma!' But nobody was there. In the darkness I had lost all sense of direction. It was too dangerous to go on walking. I wrapped my coat around myself, lay down in the grass, and fell asleep."

"In the middle of the forest at night, how scary," Ilse said with a shudder.

Papa laughed. "Believe it or not, I felt much safer in the Belgian forest than in Hamburg during the past few years. Of course, I feared the Belgian border police, but I had no choice. At daybreak I started marching off westward until I reached a village called Raeren. Right at the first house I wanted to inquire about how to get to Eupen. But then suddenly I had such a strange feeling. I passed another house. In front of the door a pretty young girl was standing that reminded me of you, Illi, quite a bit," Papa remarked, looking proudly at his grown-up daughter. She looked very trustworthy."

'Come in quickly,' the girl said when she saw me. I entered together with her. I was petrified. A big man in uniform sat at the table. He was having breakfast with his wife. They saw me turning pale and smiled. 'Please, don't be afraid,' the uniformed man calmed me. 'I am only the driver of the bus to Eupen. My shift starts shortly. I'll take you to the train station in Eupen. With me nothing will happen to you. I know everybody around here.'

His wife only said: "Luckily you didn't knock next door. They are pro-German and don't want refugees to come across the border. They would have handed you over to the border police<sup>39</sup>."

Although I was penniless, I was allowed to call you in Antwerp. The rest I needn't tell," my father concluded. "'Emma' will probably never show up. We've saved the money. I'd just like to send a little gift to these nice people in Raeren."

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<sup>39</sup> In Flanders there were probably about 100,000 "pro-Germans."

"I think everything will be all right from now on," Ilse sighed. "From here we will certainly be allowed to travel to England to join Mommy. And finally, we'll all be reunited."

## IN PRISON

I was in a hurry to get home. Today was Wednesday and we did not have school in the afternoon. On the other weekdays we went back to school after lunch for a couple of hours. In Hamburg it had been different, and at first I had to get used to it. I was looking forward to this particular afternoon off, because Papa wanted to go with Peter and me to the train station as we used to do in Hamburg.

As soon as I entered the apartment, I sensed that something was wrong. Aunt Edith cut a thick piece of honey cake for me and sat down next to me at the table. I loved this sweet Belgian cake and took a big bite. Then I asked: "Where is Papa?"

My aunt came right out with it: In the morning a policeman had come to the house and very politely had asked Papa to come with him to the station. To be on the safe side, Aunt Edith had accompanied him.

They were received by a police officer who talked to Papa in a very polite but unequivocal manner: "Mr. Koppel, you crossed the border illegally. Therefore, you'll be put on trial in a couple of days."

"All right," Aunt Edith answered instead of Papa because he did not understand Flemish yet. "Can we go now?"

They were petrified, when they heard the answer.  
"No, unfortunately not. You, Madame, may leave, naturally. But I have to keep your brother. I'm really sorry, please believe me."

When the officer saw the terrified faces of my father and my aunt, he added: "After the trial he'll be released immediately, I should hope. Right now, though, nothing can be done about it."

And so it was. Papa had already called home from prison.

"It's not so bad here," he reported. "Also, I'm not the only one in this situation. There are about 100 men, all Jews, who have crossed the border illegally, most of them from Germany. There are four of us in a cell, and we are treated much better than regular prisoners. The Jewish Community sends in meals twice a day. Of course, it is rather boring to just sit around, but we

have already gotten organized. We play chess and skat<sup>40</sup> and as my fellow prisoners are all very educated men, we have a lot to talk about."

I was shocked. Papa in prison! At least it was not a concentration camp.

"He'll certainly be released as soon as we pay the fine," Aunt Edith calmed me down.

Three days later she saw her brother again, in court. He was not in handcuffs, but was accompanied by a guard. The judge imposed a small fine on him for illegal border crossing. Aunt Edith paid immediately in cash and wanted to leave with her brother right away. But the judge shook his head. "I'm very sorry," was his answer, "but he has to stay detained until a residency permit from Brussels arrives."

With a sad face, Papa left the courtroom with the guard. He too had firmly believed that he would be able to return home.

The next day my aunt traveled to Brussels to submit all the necessary applications. She also went to the British consulate, but returned empty-handed. "We do not grant visas to Germans," the clerk there had said.

"But we are Jews. Germany has kicked us out. We are on your side. Don't you see the big *J* in the passport? You've got to help us!" my aunt insisted.

"Bring along another passport, not this German one, and I'll grant you a visa instantly," the consul said obligingly. Of course, that was impossible. We waited a long time for an answer from Brussels. At some point the rejection arrived.

It had gotten cold in the meantime, and the conditions in the prison had deteriorated. Because coal was scarce, the cells were poorly heated. They were overcrowded so that there was only one bed for every two prisoners. The internees took turns sleeping in the bed and on the floor. Although sufficient blankets were distributed, Papa had bad rheumatism.

There were visiting hours twice a week. "You won't go there!" Aunt Edith had decided. "It is no place for children."

Upset, I wrote to my mother in England, and although she had hardly any money, she phoned Uncle Gerhard immediately. Slightly hurt, he told me: "Your mother will allow you to visit your father if you insist. We will not stand in your way."

Hence, I went along to the prison with Ilse twice a week after school.

Grandma accompanied us on our first visit. We had to stand in line for over an hour outside the prison. To my astonishment, I discovered Richard Wolff among those waiting.

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<sup>40</sup> Skat is a very popular card game for adults played exclusively in Germany.

"Is your father here too, by any chance?" I asked, a bit dumb. Richard simply nodded.

When our turn came, the uniformed guard took us through bleak, long corridors into a small, entirely bare cell. A window connected it with the neighboring cell to which Papa had been brought. I pressed my hands against the glass from one side, Papa from the other. But all we felt was the cold, hard glass. We could not talk directly with each other, either. Our voices were transmitted through a loudspeaker, which distorted them. Here I stood, facing my father, but still separated by a windowpane. I was determined not to break into tears. After all, I was already twelve years old and had been forced in the past months to learn to pull myself together. We talked about all kinds of things, but much too soon the bell rang, which signaled the end of the visit.

"I'm glad you came, Gert," Papa said. "Now take care of the two ladies (I knew he was thinking the 'weaker sex') and beware of the slippery ice!"

"But there is no ice!" I exclaimed, puzzled. Papa smiled amusedly. "No? It's somewhat hard to see from here. I was probably mistaken!" Even in prison, Papa was able to cheer us up.

It did not take long and winter, icy and cold, was upon us. I waited in line with Ilse shivering in a chilling frost. Women with big shopping bags passed by and looked curiously at us. I was fuming. I would have liked to scream at them: "What's there to see? Do you think my father is a criminal?" I could have added some juicy expletives. My Flemish was nearly perfect. Embittered, I was staring straight ahead when suddenly a guard approached us.

"The warden wants to talk to you and your brother," he said to Ilse. We were terrified. Had we done something forbidden? Had something happened to Papa? What good could be expected from the warden? With a sense of foreboding we followed the guard into the office. Inside it was pleasantly warm. Behind the desk sat a man with an intelligent and friendly face. He stood up the moment we entered. "Please have a seat," he said to us and sat down again. "I saw you standing on the street, when I looked out the window a little while ago," he began. "I've seen you several times before, waiting outside, and I inquired about you. I know that your father is only interned here. These visits must be difficult for you two."

In a friendly gesture he put his arm around my shoulders. "I have two boys your age myself. Twins! Well then, I've got an idea..."

We could hardly believe what happened next. He suggested having our father come over to the office, where it was nice and warm. "I'll leave you alone for a while," he promised. "You can talk as long as you wish. There is only one thing you've got to promise me: You are not

allowed to give him anything. Whatever you bring along for him, you have to first hand it to me. I guarantee you it will be forwarded to him."

Spontaneously, I stretched out my hand to him. He took it and shook it vigorously. "That will do it," he said. I would have walked through fire for this man. Ilse handed him the bag filled with little presents for my father. He took it, made a brief phone call, and disappeared.

And here he was. Papa entered the room, alone, unguarded. I rushed up to him to hug him again at long last. Ilse stood next to us and sobbed. We could not believe this. From close up we saw that he had become thin and pale. Because of his rheumatism, he walked slightly bent over. He had already been in jail for two months.

Although nobody was interrupting us, Papa said after a while: "We don't want to take advantage of this man's kindness. I have to go back now." He kissed us and left us alone. The warden returned. "I'm pleased I could do something for you," he said to us. "From now on you can come straight to my office. I'm always here. You don't have to wait on the street. I'll let your father come here. All right?"

What a question! Ilse seemed totally overwhelmed as well. Suddenly she bent forward and hugged the warden. He laughed and said: "I always wanted a daughter like you." Ilse blushed, and then we quickly said good-bye so we could get home to report about our incredible luck.

## IN THE CASTLE

"I'm going with him. I will go with him, and nobody can stop me!" I was out of my mind and screamed at Uncle Gerhard. He left the room, shrugging his shoulders.

He had tried in vain to talk things through with me calmly, but it had not worked. I was beyond reason. I ran to the table and grabbed a stack of plates. "I'll smash everything to pieces around here, if I'm not allowed to go," I threatened in a frenzy.

Aunt Edith was unable to bring me to my senses, and in her distress she called her older sister for help. Soon thereafter Aunt Trudel was standing in the room. I still held the plates in my hands. Without a word, she took the dishes away. She grasped my hand, softly pulled me into the next room, and closed the door behind us.

"Gert, you are old enough to tell me right away what's actually going on here."

Aunt Trudel's gentle, but firm voice brought me back to my senses, and I was able to tell what had happened:

As an exception, Papa had received the permission to call us from jail. He had been offered the choice of going either to a refugee camp for single people or to a family camp with us children. In any case, they did not want to keep him in prison much longer but could not release him either, as he did not possess a residency permit. Ilse and I could choose freely between the alternatives. After all, we did have the residency permit in Belgium.

"What does your father think?" was Aunt Trudel's first question.

She did not treat me like a hysterical child, but like an adult.

"He wants us to join him."

"Do you also know why?"

"Papa says he had seen all the fortifications and German soldiers along the Belgian border when he was fleeing from Germany. He thinks that Hitler won't stop there and spare Belgium. In times like these parents and children must stay together. Ilse will come too, if Papa so wishes. But she isn't enthusiastic about this family camp. She'd rather stay, because she feels really good here. Also, she fell in love with this Jefke, this English guy who lives here."

Aunt Trudel's smile demonstrated her understanding, but she continued to sound me out.

"Why are you so eager to be with your father? Don't you like it at Edith and Gerhard's?"

I still did not feel at home with my relatives and wanted therefore to be with my father as soon as possible. But then there was something else I worried about. Should I tell Aunt Trudel?

"Out with it!" she demanded vigorously.

"First of all, I'm still a stranger here, I just don't get along so well with Uncle Gerhard. And secondly..." I hesitated.

Aunt Trudel urged: "Go on."

"It has something to do with you," I admitted falteringly. "For years now, you and the kids have been chasing after Uncle Berthold, and each time you seem to catch up with him, it's only for a brief period. He's always one step ahead of you. Papa says there will be war, and in war the close family should remain united!"

What else could I do? I felt I was somehow doing injustice to Aunt Edith and Uncle Gerhard. I also felt sorry for Ilse and Jefke. But I was longing for my mother. I was missing Papa, who had been in jail for three months already. I felt awfully sorry for everyone, but most of all for myself.

"I just want to be with Papa, and he also wants us to come!"

Aunt Trudel took me in her arms and held me tightly.

"Everybody has to do what he thinks is right," she said. "Uncle Berthold and I have had only the best intentions for all. Possibly, it was the wrong way to go. Who knows? Who will live and who will die? Is it intelligence that matters or money or because somebody is a better person than the other? Is everything pure chance? Or is there really a God in heaven that decides about everything? I have no answer. I can't tell you how much I miss Berthold! Sometimes I think I'm going to collapse under all this responsibility."

Her voice was trembling, she took a deep breath and said: "It's all very clear: You want to be with your father. Ilse wants to do whatever your father advises her to do. John has expressed his opinion in an unequivocal manner. What he says, has to be done. That's that!"

Aunt Trudel got up and went to the door.

"You stay here to think about how to apologize to Aunt Edith. That wasn't such a great idea, threatening to throw dishes. I'll talk to her and there will be no complications. I know my little sister, after all. Everything will work out just fine."

It was February 29, 1940. It was a leap year and a day I would never forget. Aunt Edith accompanied Ilse and me to the prison gates. Among the group of people who stood waiting with their suitcases was Richard Wolff and his brother, Harry, three years his senior. I was considering whether to greet him, when the gates opened. About twenty men came out and

threw themselves into the arms of their families. Behind them the warden appeared. He motioned me to him.

"Please," he said in Flemish, "translate what I'm going to say!"

"*Mijn vriende, (my friends)*" he began, and everybody became quiet.

"I'm glad for you that you are now reunited with your loved ones. That's the most important thing in life. I thank you for your patience and your cooperation during the past months. Your well being has always been a concern of mine. I believe you have realized this."

With a smile he continued: "I know I shall never see you again. Therefore, I wish to extend my best wishes to you now. Hard times are ahead for all of us. May God protect you. Shalom, Shalom."

Everybody applauded and wanted to shake hands with him.

A few minutes later we boarded the waiting bus. Richard and I had exchanged glances and had secured two seats next to each other. Ilse sat with a sad face next to Papa. Undoubtedly, she was thinking about Jefke. The ride took several hours. We passed through a small town, Huy, and saw wonderful, snow-covered scenery stretching along both sides of the road. Soon we had reached our destination: Château Marneffe. It was a huge building, once no doubt an elegant castle, but now looking more like a garrison after the numerous alterations it had undergone during more recent times.. There were, however, no bars or fences. This was not how I had imagined a camp would look.

Some German-speaking ladies and gentlemen received us in a very friendly manner. I was given accommodations in the children's dormitory in a huge, bright, very tidy room with approximately sixty beds. The children between eight and fourteen slept there. Richard and I moved some of the already occupied beds so that we could sleep next to each other. After I had arranged my belongings, I wanted to see where Papa and Ilse were put up. In this vast and labyrinthine castle it was not so easy to find one's way, but in the end we found their room.

It was an odd place, an elongated space, reminiscent of a narrow train compartment. A curtain in the middle, which suited the two of them well, divided it. We immediately declared it to be the "sleeping car."

Richard's brother, Harry, was assigned to the "apprentices" - the boys between fifteen and eighteen years of age; they had their own dormitory.

The castle was immense, full of stairways, hallways, large halls, and little rooms. We met more and more children and adults, all of them speaking German, some of them with a

funny accent. They came from Austria, Sudetenland and even Romania. Friendly faces everywhere, most with a satisfied air about them. I was overwhelmed!

Kurt, a boy from Vienna, took us around.

"We have three dining halls," he explained. "The food is quite edible. There are three classrooms. We have four hours of school every day. There is only one real teacher, all the others are volunteers. There is not much to learn from them, but they are interesting people. Most of them did something in the past that was better than teaching here. They do the best they can with us."

A stern-looking lady entered the classroom. Richard went right up to her and called: "Frau Meyer-Veilchenfeld, do you remember me?"

She remembered immediately. Like Richard she was from Cologne and the only 'real' teacher, the one Kurt had mentioned. Richard later confided to me that although she was very strict, students could learn a lot in her classes. Richard was not as enthusiastic as I was. He felt imprisoned, missed his old school, and had a lot of fights with his big brother. He did not feel very close to his father either.

For me, however, these days in the castle would be some of the best I had in Belgium. I was with Papa, and Richard and I developed a close friendship that would last over the years. We talked about everything. We read the same books and then discussed them. The castle was equipped with a large library and books in all languages. I was never bored.

The lessons did not follow a specific curriculum, but we did have interesting conversations with our volunteer "teachers." The grown-ups applied their skills to all areas of the estate. Papa volunteered for gardening. A pharmacist and three physicians found suitable occupations. We had a cobbler shop and a tailor shop. We had cooks and people who cleaned. Ilse and some other girls her age took care of the younger children.

At some point Papa and Mr. Wolff discovered a huge pile of empty bottles which must have accumulated over many years. They suggested to the camp management that the bottles should be washed in order to be able to reuse them. Whatever for? Nobody asked the question. And while washing the bottles, the two men became friends.

The internees had elected an administration of their own. Above it was the Belgian administration, which consisted of the director, a secretary, and a bookkeeper. There were no guards, and by themselves, things ran smoothly. People were simply happy to have found a

shelter here. None of the approximately four hundred internees ever left the premises. Where would anyone go, anyway?

Snow melted; spring arrived. We played soccer, handball, and German dodge ball on the vast grounds. Apprentices played against adults, sons against fathers, Germans against Austrians, there was no end to the various combinations. Richard was an excellent soccer player; I was rather mediocre. My friend, though, remained loyal and always took me with him on his team. Less athletic persons could play instruments or join a theater group.

Indeed, only Mommy was missing to make our happiness complete. Meanwhile she had learned about our relocation and was absolutely against it. In desperate letters of protest she wrote: "Gert needs to go back to the proper school right away, and Ilse needs to receive some professional training. I simply cannot allow the children to live in a camp!" She beseeched Uncle Gerhard and Grandma to take us back to Antwerp. In her letters she entreated Papa: "If you still love me, John, then send the kids back to Edith and Gerhard. You must not think about yourself, John. The children are what is most important. I know, you do not like to be alone. But I am lonely too; I have nobody here. You can get used to anything if you have to."

Papa kept explaining to her calmly all the reasons for his decision. She would not have any of it. I fretted: what if Mommy prevailed?

Then Papa wrote a letter, which he gave us to read prior to sending it: "Dearest Magda; We do not want to continue quarreling. My love for you and the children is boundless; no need to tell you. I have always listened to you, and we all fared well that way. This time, however, I have to insist on my conviction: the children will stay here, because according to their birth certificates, I am the father."

Mommy gave in. She knew the limits of her considerable influence. I admired Papa's determination to prevail and was particularly impressed by the phrase "because according to their birth certificates, I am the father." His decision would save our lives<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> \* The Marneffe family camp would be the only internment camp in Belgium whose inmates were not deported to the Gurs camp near Perpignan in the south of France at the onset of war in 1940. Jews who landed there were later transported to concentration camps in Poland.

Life in the castle became even more riveting for me: I had discovered girls! Of course, I had been in the company of girls before. My sister, Ilse, had been there for me all along, and I liked Fee. But something had changed. I was looking at girls differently, and they, too, seemed to be interested in me. I took a real fancy to some of them. Others seemed boring, and one I considered being downright ugly. One day I discovered Liesel from Düsseldorf. I could not help but gaze at her dark, silky hair shimmering in the sun. I had never realized before that hair could be so beautiful. We glanced at each other. She had dark eyes. We started walking side by side sometimes and having animated conversations. Occasionally, as if by magic, our hands would touch. The next thing I knew we were holding hands. That was exhilarating.

My friends teased me a bit, probably because they were jealous.

Despite my friendship with Liesel, I still liked to be with Richard better than with anyone else. The world, however, had gotten larger, even though we were living in a confined space.

The weeks passed rapidly. I lived without any worries. Time seemed to stand still.

Then came the cruel awakening.

## BOMBS FALLING EVERYWHERE

"Richard," I called, shaking my friend to wake up. "What is that noise? It can't be thunder!"

Richard sat up in his bed, and we both listened to the rumbling sound coming from far away. The sun was shining brightly in a cloudless blue sky. It was still early in the morning, but from the garden we heard excited voices. Quickly we put on our sweat suits and dashed down the stairway. Papa and Mr. Wolff stood together. They had just heard the news.

"So now it has happened," my father said gloomily. "Those criminals have invaded Belgium. What we hear is artillery fire." Mr. Wolff nodded silently. It was May 10, 1940.

The castle's inhabitants were all in a panic. Several asked for a meeting with the Belgian director. Immediately they were called into the office of this quiet and friendly man with whom there had not been much contact. Mr. Wolff and my father went with them.

The director received the anxious group right away.

"What's going on is just unbelievable. At the moment I am perplexed myself. But you ought to know one thing: I will not forget my responsibilities. I see it as my task to try to bring you to safety, perhaps to England. Have trust in me and give me a little time so that I may be able to help you."

On May 12 we heard the following announcement: "Get ready! Please take only one suitcase. Busses are going to arrive soon and will take you to the coast. Final destination is England!"

I could already see myself with Mommy.

Exactly at noon the Belgian director appeared with the Jewish administrators in the garden. He spoke French, which was translated sentence after sentence.

"I have worked all night through," he began. "Without my secretary, Mademoiselle Duprès, I would never have managed. She already left with her family half an hour ago. Our job here has come to an end. I'll now give each of you a laissez-passer<sup>42</sup>. During the night we issued more than 400 of them and I signed them all personally. This document will be very useful to you. Unfortunately, the busses did not manage to get through. It is now left up to you to find

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<sup>42</sup> "Laissez-passer" is a French term, which means, "allow to pass"; it was an identification card meant to help us along our way.

your own way to freedom. I advise you to try and get to England. I'll do the same thing and will leave Château Marneffe any moment now. I wish you lots of luck with all my heart."

He wanted to leave quickly but was held back. Everybody wanted to thank him, to shake his hand if possible. Somebody intoned spontaneously the *Brabançonne*, the Belgian national anthem, and everybody joined in as best as they could.

The director was deeply moved. He waved for the last time and left by car with his wife while the laissez-passers were distributed to everyone.

We never saw this good man again. His determined action has never been acknowledged officially although it was a heroic deed. He had made out these vital documents totally on his own without asking for approval from the authorities in Brussels.

Then loaves of bread were distributed and we marched off. Once on the road, it quickly became clear that we were not the only ones to run away. The roads were jammed with tens of thousands of fleeing Belgians all moving westward. Everybody wanted to reach the English Channel as fast as possible. Horse-drawn vehicles, teams of oxen, a bus here and there, trucks and automobiles moved along the main and side roads. Some people pushed their belongings in handcarts. Others pulled small carriages or took along bicycles that they had loaded with their possessions. Most of them simply walked like we did. They were heavily laden with luggage. Repeatedly we were driven into the fields by soldiers and numerous military convoys traveling in both directions, westward with the injured, and eastward to the front with fresh troops.

Ilse stopped all of a sudden and sat down on her suitcase. "I can't go on anymore," she lamented. "I have to rest for a while. My feet burn like hell!"

We had been marching only for four hours and were already completely exhausted. The 400 residents of Marneffe had dispersed. Many had fallen behind; some had taken different ways. Richard, Harry, and Mr. Wolff had long since passed us. Apparently they were stronger than we were. I knew that Liesel and her family were still behind us. She had given me her small locket, a silver heart, as a farewell gift. Richard had been very impressed.

We were marching in a group of approximately twenty. Almost the whole time I had been walking next to an elderly man. Mr. Kahn came from a small town in Westphalia.

We had lively conversations: "I was active in the volunteer fire department!" he told me proudly. "There, I learned a number of useful tricks for all kind of situations. I had a general store as well where you could buy virtually everything. All gone! Well, can't be changed!"

Mr. Kahn looked at Ilse's feet.

"They need some doctoring!" he decided with the specialist's eye. He was well equipped. We had not even thought about taking a first-aid kit. After he had treated Ilse's feet expertly he declared: "Well, now you can walk all the way to England! It won't hurt."

We kept on walking for hours in the heat.

"Still better than rain," Papa consoled us. But that, too, would come.

Ilse had stopped again. "Look over here, Papa, piles of suitcases are lying around. They don't seem to belong to anyone," she said. Then she caught on and put her suitcase next to the others. "I'm not going to drag along this stupid thing any longer, not even one more step," she announced defiantly. Papa implored her, but to no avail. Ilse could not take it anymore. She stood there like an obstinate mule. I had never seen her like that before.

Old Mr. Kahn joined in. "Mutiny?" he asked. "Mutineers get hanged!" He produced a bottle of brandy from his pocket and gave it to Ilse. "That helps! You'll see. Don't make a face, and do what Grandpa Kahn says!" Ilse took a deep swig. The drink seemed indeed to help. "Enough, enough, my girl!" Mr. Kahn cautioned. "You are not supposed to get drunk right away. That girl's going to be a carouser!"

Now all of us were laughing. But our helper had yet another idea. His own belongings were neatly arranged in a backpack. He knew it was much easier to carry luggage on his back than in his hands. Our suitcases had been packed with a bus ride in mind. Resolutely he went to the abandoned pieces of luggage and pulled out a sheet here, a tablecloth there. "Let's see what you really need, Gert," he said, and opened my suitcase. He put things on the tablecloth: underwear, shirts, washcloth, soap, shoes. My heart was bleeding when I saw what this courageous man left in my suitcase, but I was glad that he took from me the weight of making the decisions myself. He formed a bundle from the tablecloth, which I could easily carry on my back.

"You'll do the same thing for yourself and Ilse!" He urged my father. "There are plenty of sheets; all first-class quality. You wouldn't have been able to buy them for less than thirty Marks in my store, not even during sales!" Papa smiled amusedly and got busy. Ten minutes later we started walking again. Ilse seemed as though she were newly born; I hardly felt the burden on my back. I even started to whistle. My admiration for the volunteer fire department had grown enormously.

We spent the first night in an orchard, and we froze terribly as we only had thin blankets. Later we went to farms and slept in barns. Many houses were already deserted, which was

actually good for us. Often the chickens were still there and continued to lay eggs. We found other edible things. If the owners were still on the farm, we tried to buy from them.

But the worst was still ahead of us. Ilse and I had not noticed anything in particular. But Papa had his eyes all over the place. He had seen the airplanes approaching.

"Into the ditch, immediately!" He screamed suddenly and pushed us, not very gently, from the road into the ditch. Not one second too early. A squadron of airplanes - silvery and glistening - appeared in the skies, like vicious, giant insects.

"What is this, Papa?" I asked totally intimidated by the noise. My ears resounded with the ugly roaring of the Stukas, German dive-bombers. The air was filled with it. Explosions shook the ground like an earthquake. "These are bombs, but they are falling far away from here." Suddenly three airplanes left the formation. They made an elegant loop, and flew seemingly directly towards us.

"Down, down," Papa shouted and forced us even deeper into the ditch. We heard the engines, we even saw the pilot as he set out to dive. Suddenly there was a terrible rattling. "Machine guns," somebody shouted out. I pressed my face into the crook of my arm and dug my fingers into the earth. Then the horror was over.

In the distance the incident seemed to repeat itself. Finally we dared to get up again. Dazed, we continued to stumble along. The explosions had not been as close as they sounded.

"Don't look, go on fast," Papa ordered all of a sudden. I hesitated. I had to see what had happened. I had never seen a dead person before. Now I saw a dozen or more at once. A broken down team of oxen lay there with the farmer on the coachman's seat collapsed forward, lifeless. All around there were bodies, all of them completely motionless. The oxen were nearly dead too. One of them jerked a bit, then he produced some faint sounds.

"Come," Papa urged us, "nobody can help anymore."

"They are coming again," Ilse screamed. This time we jumped into the ditch right away. We could clearly identify the German insignia on the airplanes. I shook my fists at them. "What did we do to you?" I shouted. Nobody could hear me. There were no soldiers or weapons in our vicinity. It was impossible that the pilots did not realize that these were just civilians fleeing. "They only want to spread fear," somebody said. "The more havoc on the roads the better for the enemy." "It makes it more difficult for our army convoys to get through," another added.

There was shooting from the airplanes again. This time much further away, from the direction we had come from. I could not help but worry about Liesel, who was behind us. Where

might she be now? When it became dark the airplanes stopped coming. We found an empty barn for overnight.

It went on like this, day after day. Every evening we climbed up to the haylofts above the deserted farmhouses. In smaller places the inhabitants had usually run away already. Refugees ahead of us had broken into stores. Most of the time we found a little bit of food, not too much, though. Other people would look at us suspiciously. After all, most of us were speaking German.

"Spies, spies!" a fat woman once screamed. Police arrived immediately. We showed our laissez-passers, which were examined, front to back. After we had explained the situation we were allowed to continue. From then on we did not talk too much if other people were nearby.

In the small town of Gembloux, which had been heavily bombarded, our march was interrupted. Again there was police control. Papa saw the suspicious glances. "Go over there, Ilse," he suggested, "and explain everything to them." In an instant the police officer put our precious papers into his pocket. He motioned us to follow him.

Ten minutes later we were in a cell of a police station. "Do we have to spend all night here?" I asked. "It looks like it," Papa replied. Ilse was crying for a change; she felt nauseous. "I have to vomit," she moaned. A bucket stood in the corner. We shook the barred door. It was opened, and Ilse was allowed to get out. Papa could stay with her. They did not seem to trust me, which amused me a great deal. Ilse felt better outside in the fresh air. In spite of everything, I fell asleep at some point.

Early in the morning a uniformed person entered. He looked like a high-ranking officer. "I am so sorry," he said, "but we have to be vigilant. There are German spies all over the place. Your papers are OK. You can move on." Papa was angry. "What do you think," he scolded in his best French. "Do you really believe spies run around like this? They come with perfect papers and good knowledge of the language. You would never recognize them!" The officer kept repeating: "I'm sorry," but then he ordered a copious breakfast and even gave us the leftovers to take with us. Just because of this, I had already forgiven him.

Day after day we continued our arduous journey. We had almost gotten used to the sight of dead bodies. We threw ourselves into the ditches automatically as soon as we heard airplanes approaching. Our clothes were stiff from dirt. We were dog-tired and totally exhausted. We had gotten to northern France, near Lille, but were still in some distance from the coast.

One evening we had entered a barn very early. It was another thing we had learned: Better to start out early in the morning and look early for a place to spend the night before the better spots were already occupied.

At dawn, we were startled awake by the noise of engines. Papa leaned out of the barn window to see what was going on. We kept hoping a truck that would take us to the coast would pick us up. So far we had been unlucky. Perhaps it would work out today? Papa stepped back from the window and waved to our group that had shrunk to fourteen persons. Everybody gathered silently around him, because he had put his index on his lips. Then we heard as he said in a low but clear voice: "They have caught up with us. German troops are in the yard!"

## BACK IN ANTWERP

"Where are you coming from and where are you headed to?" asked the German soldier. It seemed obvious to him that all of us understood German. So as not to give ourselves away, we had agreed not to let on that we all had a perfect command of the German language. When he did not hear an answer, he continued to ask: "Are you hungry? Do you want to eat something?"

The camp hairdresser was part of our small group. He placed himself in front of the soldier, and said: "*Oui, oui, Monsieur.*" It was practically everything this good man from Berlin knew in French. The soldier, who was about my father's age, laughed benevolently. "I was sure you would understand the word 'eat!'" He waved to me to come over to him and gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"You look to me as if you could use some food," he said and led me outside. He loaded my arms with wonderful things: bread, butter, sausage, and cheese, even chocolate. We were given milk and tea to drink. I had to go back and forth a couple of times. All the while the soldier talked to me in German and I pretended not to understand. Apparently, the soldiers had received orders to be kind to the fleeing civilians.

Thoughts were buzzing around in my head: Are these the same people who had beaten Mr. Herz' legs in the concentration camp? Perhaps this soldier has a son at home who tortures Jewish kids on their way to school?

I had forgotten nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing! Fear, which I believed I had overcome, again crept into my consciousness. We were still having our unexpected and tasty meal when a sergeant entered. He spoke French well. "We have received orders to transport the refugees to their desired destinations. I assume you all want to return home. You see, we do not mean you any harm. We even feed you. Did the English do the same?" Obediently, we shook our heads. "So where to?" Where to, indeed? To England, I thought to myself. Papa said: "Anvers," (Antwerp) and a few others said: "Bruxelles," (Brussels). The sergeant counted the raised hands and wrote everything down.

Very early the next morning I was called again and was given some bread for all of us. It was not much. Less than half an hour later two truck arrived already filled with people. Everyone seemed to be quite satisfied. So we climbed onto the truck with the sign "Antwerp." The ride in the back of the open truck was actually fun. Only two days ago we would have given everything for such a ride in the other direction! We did not see refugees on the roads anymore.

Instead, there were plenty of German military with heavy artillery. Now we had an explanation for the kindness of the Germans. The army was eager to empty the roads so they could advance unobstructed toward the English Channel. They wanted, if at all possible, to catch up with the fleeing British soldiers<sup>9</sup>. Before noon the truck stopped at the train station in Antwerp. "Get off everybody," we heard. Then the truck left, and we stood there with our bundles, not knowing what to do next. Nobody paid any attention to us.

"What now, Papa?" I asked.

"Let's see if Aunt Edith and Uncle Gerhard are at home," he suggested. It was not far to their apartment. We were in for a big disappointment when we arrived there. The landlady was unfriendly although she knew exactly who we were. "They are all gone," she said curtly, "and they won't return anymore!" With this she slammed the door in our faces.

"We have to go on looking," Papa said. We went from one apartment to the next. We did not only seek out our relatives, but friends and acquaintances we could think of, as well. But nobody was there. It seemed they had all run away from the German assault. We could only hope they were safe now.

But where should we go? We were utterly exhausted and at a loss for what to do. The afternoon had gone by fast looking for people. There were no barns or abandoned farms in Antwerp where we could spend the night. This was a big city where everything had to be paid for, but we were penniless. All we had left were our bundles, exactly as Hitler had predicted. Would all the other threats come true as well?

We had reached the Meir again, the main street where I used to stroll with Peter and have a good time, treating ourselves to ice cream now and then. I was filthy and terribly worn-out. The small slice of bread in the morning was the only thing we had eaten that day.

Suddenly we saw a long line of rather shabby people waiting.

"What do they get here?" Ilse asked. The answer came instantly: "Here, everybody receives free soup from the municipality. But one has to wait in line for a long time. It moves very slowly." I took my dirty bundle from the back and sat down on the street, leaning on a lamppost. I closed my eyes for a moment.

Suddenly a hand touched me. I looked up; a woman was standing in front of me. She bent down with a smile and gave me money without saying a word. Then she was gone. Incredulous, I looked in my hand: twenty Francs. A fortune! I had not begged for it, but I must have looked so miserable and unhappy that this good woman was unable to ignore me. Papa and

Ilse had meanwhile advanced in the line. "Look what I've got," I shouted and jumped up. It was like dream. It was a miracle.

The decision as to how to use the money was made easily. The department store, L'Innovation, was located nearby and had a cheap, but adequate restaurant. We wanted to eat there. Soon we sat around a nice table with plates, glasses, and silverware. The meal was simple, good, and satisfying. When was the last time we had sat around a set table? Our worries seemed to diminish gradually and we felt new courage. "That's thanks to a full stomach," Papa said. We were even able to wash ourselves a little and looked better right away.

Suddenly I had an idea: "Perhaps the Meyer-Udewald's<sup>43</sup> are at home." They were friends of Aunt Edith and Uncle Gerhard, and I knew their daughter Nora well. Back in Hamburg, we had studied piano at the same conservatory before Jews were banned. Together, we had played fourhanded piano music at a recital.

We paid our bill and even had some money left.

A little later we stood with pounding hearts in front of the door that had the nameplate "Meyer-Udewald" on it. Ilse rang the bell. No answer. She tried a second time and kept pressing down the doorbell in despair. The door opened and a man we did not know stood in the doorway. I was terrified. The man looked at us briefly and said: "Please, come on in!" In the direction of the living room he called out: "Here come numbers fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen." Then we saw Mrs. Meyer-Udewald with Nora and her younger brother, Hänschen.

All was told quickly. Mr. Meyer-Udewald had been interned by the Belgians along with all Germans on May 10. There had been no news about him. The other three family members had returned two days ago from a futile attempt to escape.

"Yes, and now we have opened a hotel here," Mrs. Meyer-Udewald joked. "Our rates are based on credit. That's why business is flourishing. Everybody, though, has to be satisfied with what we have. Naturally, there aren't enough beds, but there are plenty of blankets. I suggest you first go to the bathroom, then I'll show you where you can lie down quite comfortably."

She did not have to say this twice. We still had soap in our luggage. Our hostess gave us beautiful, clean towels - a real luxury!

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<sup>43</sup> This well-known Jewish family from Hamburg had also emigrated to Belgium. From there, Mr. Meyer-Udewald was taken to a labor camp in the south of France, but managed to get to Cuba. The mother along with her son and daughter were sent to

When we appeared in the living room later on, another two of the "homeless" had arrived. They, too, were received jokingly. I was lucky: Hänschen shared his bed with me. What a wonderful sensation to sleep in a clean, soft bed.

I have never forgotten this family and their hospitality.

Three days later our relatives also returned to Antwerp. Uncle Gerhard and Aunt Edith had spent a huge amount of money arranging for two big cars right after the German assault. The families had tried to escape in them and had reached Boulogne in France when the Germans caught up with them. As gasoline was no longer available, they had to leave the cars behind and return in German trucks. The cars were never recovered.

Our relatives returned to their own apartments. Now I also understood why the landlady had been so hostile toward us: she had probably been hoping to be the new owner of all the furniture.

After a while we, too, had found temporary lodgings. We settled in Grandma's tiny apartment, and our life acquired a fairly regular rhythm. Things seemed to be almost normal. Only our fear had remained with us.

I went back to my former school where I really missed my friend Richard. After the unsuccessful flight he had returned with his father and Harry to Brussels. His mother had joined them there. We wrote letters to each other regularly.

Uncle Gerhard's export business had come to a complete halt because of the war. He now had to live on his savings and had moved to a much smaller, cheaper apartment. As a result, the help he was able to extend to his family had become quite limited.

Papa, however, had an idea. One day he asked me: "Can you come with me to help me earn some money? Today we will play movers. Look outside!"

In front of the door there was a big cart. "Are you actually talking about that thing out there?" I asked suspiciously. "Certainly. What did you imagine?"

My enthusiasm cooled down, but Papa was all excited: "There is no gasoline, but many of our acquaintances have to move. They are without any income, they need smaller apartments or they go to share apartments with other people. In any case, furniture is being moved. Therefore I let people know that I am ready to take moving jobs. I guarantee we will have enough work to sustain us. Going around like this, you get to hear a lot too. Many male members of families we know are now interned in the south of France. These families need sometimes help in various matters. I can step in and earn some more money at the same time. Things need to be sold or bought. I can arrange deals if I get to go into so many households."

Then Papa quoted one of his favorite sayings: "A person might be dumb, but he can still find a way."

And he was right. The first day I was a little embarrassed to push such a cart piled high with furniture. My father harnessed himself to it in the front. I was hoping not to meet anybody from school. But it did not take long before a boy from my class appeared around the corner. When he saw us panting and pushing he ran toward us. He was much taller and stronger than I was, and I did not really like him.

"That's fabulous," Jan called. "Can I help out?"

He could. Now there were three of us, and things went much better. He worked all afternoon with us. At the end, after Papa had received his money, he wanted to give Jan five Francs. At first he refused, but Papa was able to convince him finally. Jan thanked us and helped regularly from then on. In school he talked a lot with me now and raved about my fabulous father. I was enormously proud of Papa. His strange "business" did so well that Papa was able to rent a furnished room for the two of us where we slept. Ilse continued to stay with Grandma, and all of us had lunch in her apartment. Papa had earned enough to provide Grandma with money for food. Ilse also contributed to our livelihood: she cleaned houses and worked as a nursemaid.

One day Papa came to Grandma, beaming: "A letter from Mommy," he called from the entrance. It was not really a letter, rather a brief message of twenty-five words, which the International Red Cross had forwarded from England via Switzerland to Uncle Gerhard's address. The message was three months old. But it said that Mommy was well and waiting for news from us. Seeing Mommy's own handwriting moved us deeply.

We were able to reply through the same communication channel. We were also limited to twenty-five words. Mommy sometimes received the messages six months after we sent them and by that time our situation had often completely changed. Nevertheless, we were happy to be able to communicate at all.

Toward the end of summer Papa asked me: "Have you already thought about your bar mitzvah<sup>44</sup>?"

"But it's war," I replied.

"That's why we should particularly make the effort," was Papa's answer.

Then Mr. Rosenboom started coming over. He saw that I had already acquired quite a good knowledge of Hebrew in Hamburg. But there were still many things I did not yet know.

"Bar mitzvah' means 'son of duty,' " he explained to me. "At thirteen, A Jewish boy is accepted as a responsible member into the community of adults. This means that he himself is accountable before God for all his deeds. On his thirteenth birthday he is allowed, for the first time, to read a portion from the Torah, which is the holiest foundation of the Jewish religion."

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<sup>44</sup> Also Jews who are not so observant keep this tradition. It is comparable to the Christian rite of confirmation.

Mr. Rosenboom was a good teacher. I asked him lots of questions, and he always had a satisfying answer at hand. In particular, he taught me all the songs. The blessings as well as the Torah readings were chanted in a prescribed way, not spoken. As my voice had already changed, I could sing rather well. Dr. Jacobsen, my teacher from Hamburg, would have been pleased with me.

To my joy, Richard arrived in Antwerp already one day before the big event. Papa spent the night somewhere else and yielded his bed to my friend for the night. We talked through half the night; there was so much to tell! Around four o'clock Richard admonished me: "If you don't sleep now, you won't be able to sing tomorrow."

Because of the German occupation the big synagogue was closed. The much smaller prayer room was not as magnificent, but still ceremonious and impressive. The rabbi and the cantor had put on their black robes and white skullcaps. It seemed to me that the cantor sang particularly beautifully that day.

My father sat to my right, Richard to my left. Next to Papa was Uncle Gerhard. Since we did not live together anymore we got along quite well. Nearly all of Papa's family was gathered together. It would be for the last time.

I was painfully aware that Mommy and her family were absent. They were dispersed all over the world.

I was shaken out of my thoughts when I heard my name resounding in the room, my Hebrew name, Zvi ben Jacob<sup>45</sup>. That was the moment! With my heart pounding, I climbed the little staircase to the pulpit. The Torah scroll lay in front of me. I became very calm. I forgot everything: my mother's absence, the family who sat in front of me, the rabbi and the cantor who stood next to me. I sang the ancient blessings at the top of my voice, and then my Torah portion. I had practiced it many times, and it went smoothly, without mistakes. When it was over, I was sorry that I had to return to my seat.

Later I was called to the pulpit again where I gave a little speech. I thanked my parents and relatives who had helped me to develop and advance so far in my life. I did not forget to mention Aunt Edith and Uncle Gerhard in particular. I spoke about the Bible portion I had just read out loud. I was very pleased with myself in that role. Then everything was over.

We left the synagogue in small groups, taking care not to attract attention.

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<sup>45</sup> "Zvi ben Jacob" is translated into English: Zvi (deer), the son of Jacob.

Following the ceremony, we all met again at Grandma's small apartment. There was a true "pre-war quality" apple cake on the table. We also had pastries and even whipped cream. All the relatives had contributed to the celebration. In this war winter of 1940, food was already rationed<sup>46</sup> and very scarce. There were even small gifts for me. Aunt Trudel gave me a book that I had always admired in her house. She had written a dedication on the first page of Mommsen's *Roman History*: "To my dear Gert on his bar mitzvah in difficult times. An immortal work, which will provide you, the boy with a zest for learning and a thirst for knowledge, with many a pleasurable hour of reading. A time, long since vanished, will arise before your eyes and it will make you forget the ugly present. May you just pass through it into a bright and sunny future. With love, your Aunt Trudel."

Her wish became true for me. But for her and for her children there would be no future.

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<sup>46</sup> Food, clothing, and cigarettes were available only with ration cards. The rations were continually cut back.

## DESTINATION: KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

"Won't they ever leave us alone?" I screamed. Papa looked at me earnestly: "Not as long as the Nazis rule the world."

"And how long will that be, Papa?" I knew there was no answer to this. Therefore I was rather surprised when I heard him say: "We will live to see it. Please, don't ever doubt this!"

We had to move on again. The occupation authorities had made an announcement: All Jews were ordered to leave the city. Antwerp was a naval port, therefore Jews could not be tolerated there. Noncompliance would be punished severely.

The family council gathered. All of us were affected by this measure. It was decided that the three sisters, Aunt Trudel, Aunt Edith, and Aunt Tilly should travel to Brussels to rent apartments, if possible, for all of us. Aunt Tilly, my father's oldest sister, lived in Antwerp with her two sons Gerhard and Heinz.

We looked forward expectantly to the return of the aunts. I liked the idea of moving to Brussels. I had just finished my sixth school year and was on vacation. Whether we stayed or moved, I would have to transfer to a high school, anyway. Although in Antwerp I would leave behind many good friends, I knew Richard Wolff awaited me in Brussels. And that outweighed everything else.

The aunts returned the very next day. "I have rented an apartment for us," Aunt Edith reported. "For Grandma we were able to find a furnished room nearby. We can leave tomorrow."

Aunt Trudel had been less successful. "Unfortunately, we haven't found a place for myself, for you, or for Aunt Tilly. There wasn't anything suitable. But I'm sure we'll find something eventually."

She smiled and suddenly cracked up. Although we did not know what was so funny, she infected us with her laughter. After she had finally composed herself, she blurted out: "We don't have apartments, but I did manage to organize some kind of van to transport our furniture and the rest of the household. It's got just enough gas to make it to Brussels. The day after tomorrow we are off. Who ever heard of such a thing! We hit town, all ten of us, with sack and pack and everything but the kitchen sink - but most of us have nowhere to live. And if we're out of gas, you'll have to push. You with your cart business, Gert and John, are used to it anyway!"

We looked at each other, amazed. Then we burst out laughing again until we had tears in our eyes. This was vintage Aunt Trudel. She simply did not knuckle under and never lost her sense of humor even in difficult situations.

Two days later we were on our way. The truck looked like a model from 1910. It huffed and puffed; it heated up; it rattled and sputtered. But we did not have to push. We got to Uccle, a district of Brussels. It was a rather pretty, but not too expensive area. Aunt Trudel discovered a house with a sign on the window: "*A louer!*" (For rent!)

Aunt Trudel introduced herself right away to the landlord, who was very nice, and was able to rent the apartment on the spot.

"And when do you want to move in?" the landlord asked.

Aunt Trudel pulled him toward the window. "Our furniture is down there in the truck. We are already here!" Again she laughed in her contagious manner, so that the good man could do nothing but repeat: "*Quelle affaire, quelle affaire!*" (Such a story, such a story!) Then he had to laugh himself. "Madame, I'm glad I leased the apartment to you. These are difficult times, especially for you."

Apparently he was aware of our special situation as he inquired further and then said: "I have an acquaintance who owns a house right around the corner. I'll call him now. I think he has something available that won't be too expensive either."

Papa, Ilse, and I went immediately to the specified address. We reached a narrow house on Chaussée d'Alsemberg. Number 563 was quickly found. A man stood in front of the door. He spoke German fluently. "I am originally from Eupen-Malmedy," he started to explain.. "I am, however, Belgian."

Monsieur Vaume led us inside, and we sat down in his beautiful office. He had a wholesale wallpaper business. First of all he wanted to know all about us. When he heard that Ilse was perfect in German and French shorthand, he offered her a job right away: "You can work in my office; I urgently need somebody like you. I have no other employees. I, myself, am living with my wife upstairs on the second floor. Here, on the first floor the little apartment would be available, which I'll gladly let you have. Finally he mentioned her salary. Ilse was speechless. The amount seemed huge to us. How long had it been since she or Papa had a predictable income? We would all be able to live from this money. "I'll be happy to accept that," Ilse said.

"And how much is the rent?" Papa wanted to know.

"But this is part of the salary. The apartment won't cost you anything," was the answer. We could hardly believe this.

Our strange truck had meanwhile arrived, and we started to move in right away. As Grandma had found a furnished room, we were able to use her two beds for Ilse and myself. A couple of empty wooden boxes served as kitchen furniture together with a wobbly sofa that was there already. During the day we could sit on it; in the evening it was opened up and became Papa's bed. The rooms, which were arranged one behind the other, were very dark. The tiny windows were pasted over with wallpaper, which we scraped off. The last room was a bit more spacious and even had a big window facing the garden. In it was a huge bathtub with all the water pipes torn out. Because of space constraints our "chest," an elaborate structure of six wooden boxes, had to be placed in this "bathroom." Later on Grandma sewed a curtain to put in front of this special "piece of furniture."

When I saw the apartment for the first time, I was rather put off. For years these rooms had been used solely as a storage area. In time, though, and with Grandma's help it became a cozy home after all.

## BLOW UPON BLOW

As Aunt Edith put it, Uncle Gerhard had "gone to the dogs". He did not have his business in Antwerp anymore, so he had acquired a dog as a pastime.

"Uncle Gerhard, can I walk the dog?" I begged him one day. "I think so, but am I allowed to join?" was the unexpected answer.

Our promenades as a threesome were to become a pleasant habit. We had established a much better relationship since Uncle Gerhard was relieved of his role as my surrogate father. We almost became friends.

Therefore I was hit hard when one evening he and Aunt Edith came over to confide to us: "We want to try and reach the unoccupied part of the south of France<sup>47</sup>. This is going to be the same kind of enterprise as your 'Emma-Emma' adventure, John, when you smuggled yourself over the German-Belgian border. We hope to get from there into neutral Portugal, then we want to travel to Argentina where my business partner is already awaiting me. Wish us good luck!"

"When do you start off?" Papa asked.

"We don't know exactly yet, but beginning tomorrow we start to sell our possessions. Then the people who organize everything will pick us up from our apartment. I am not allowed to tell you more. Please, don't talk to anybody about it. The exact date is confidential. We want to say good-bye today."

Streams of tears followed. When would we see each other again? Aunt Edith kept repeating: "If only we could take you with us."

We learned that they had had to pay a lot of money to cross the border unscathed. We also envied them a bit, because soon they would be safe. Two days later I went by to ask whether Uncle Gerhard would like to take a walk with me one more time. There was no answer to my ringing. The janitor came out of his basement apartment.

"They went on a journey," he informed me. "I myself don't know whether they'll return, because the furniture has been carried away just now. The rent is paid..."

He was about to continue, but I had heard enough. I went home and felt almost unbearably lonely. That same day we went to visit Uncle Gerhard's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Stoppelmann, who also lived in Brussels. But they did not know any more than we did.

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<sup>47</sup> At first, Germany did not occupy the whole of France. The south was ruled by the pro-Nazi Vichy government under Marshall Petain. The German Wehrmacht entered

They had, however, received very bad news from Renate and Peter Pollak, who had lived with them in Antwerp for two years. Shortly before the Stoppelmann's involuntary relocation to Brussels, Peter and Renate had returned to Hamburg. This return had been possible because the Germans now also occupied Belgium. It had not seemed to make any difference whether they were in Belgium or in Hamburg with their mother whom they had missed so much.

The first letters they had received were rather contented, although ever-increasing restrictions were being imposed on Jews in Germany: Between eight o'clock in the evening and six o'clock in the morning Jews were not allowed to be on the streets. Jews were prohibited from going into parks. Jews had to hand over their radios and telephones without any compensation.

Food was rationed for Germany's entire population, but Jews received their food ration cards at separate administrative offices. A big *J* was stamped on their cards, and they were allotted much smaller rations than 'Aryans.' Eggs, fruits, poultry, fish, sweets, and many other items were unavailable to Jews. They could not obtain ration cards for clothing either, so they were unable to buy garments. The latest curse was the requirement that they sew a big yellow star with a *J* on it on their clothes. Without that sign they were not allowed to go out on the streets<sup>48</sup>.

If the children had already tormented me on my way to school without this star, how terrible must it be now to go around in public marked like that. The situation for Jews had become more humiliating now than it was several hundred years ago in the ghettos<sup>49</sup>.

Jews now had to live in designated areas. In Hamburg, old and dilapidated houses around the burned down synagogue and the Talmud-Torah school had been declared "Jewish houses." They were marked on the outside with the Jewish star and were alarmingly overcrowded.

In December of 1941, a sad farewell letter from Peter, Renate, and their mother had arrived at the Stoppelmann's: "Tomorrow we shall leave Hamburg," their mother wrote. "We are being relocated to the East. Where, we do not know. May God help us that we all remain healthy. I thank you for all the good you did for my children. I shall never be able to repay you."

<sup>48</sup> On September 19, 1941, a police decree was issued in Germany stipulating that all Jews from the age of six up had to wear the Jewish star affixed to the left side of their clothes at all times when in public.

<sup>49</sup> From the Middle Ages until the 19th century Jewish ghettos (isolated quarters where Jews were required to live) existed in many European cities. During World War II, the Nazi occupation forces again established ghettos in the big cities of Poland (e.g. Warsaw) and the Baltic states (e.g. Riga). From these ghettos Jews were deported to the death camps.

Peter had added: "Our Grandma will also come with us. Special greetings to my friend Gert." Renate wrote: "I am so afraid, but Mommy says all of us will stay together for sure."

This letter was their last sign of life.

Unfortunately, there was also very bad news from Uncle Gerhard and Aunt Edith a short time later. While fleeing they had been caught by French police and handed over to the Germans. Now they sat in the transit camp in Drancy<sup>50</sup>, not far from Paris.

"It failed," Aunt Edith wrote. "Oh, we should not have taken that chance. But I do not want to complain, even though your elegant Gerhard looks quite shabby by now, worse than a tramp. One deteriorates very quickly over here. Still, it was a particularly beautiful life we had, more delightful and richer than many other people had. My husband was my bliss. I think about the past, and it was wonderful. That helps me forget the dreadful present. I do not dare to think about a future."

Uncle Gerhard wrote: "Edith is so pessimistic today. That can change with her very quickly, though. I am not going to be discouraged so fast."

In the meantime our own situation had become increasingly difficult. There were rumors that the *Judenstern* (Jewish star) was soon to become mandatory in Belgium too. All Jews above the age of sixteen would be recruited for labor service.

Aunt Trudel was anxious about Kurt, and in her despair had made up her mind: "Despite Gerhard's and Edith's negative experience, I am going to dare to do it, John, I have to do it. I have had news from Berthold in America through the Red Cross. He says, everything is ready for us. He mentions a friend whom I know that lives in Lisbon. This can only mean that Berthold advises me to get into neutral Portugal. There is no other way than the illegal. I have to try, John. What do you think?"

Papa hugged his sister. "What can I advise you?" he said. "From Holland the Jews are also being deported to the East<sup>51</sup>. How long will things hold here? Perhaps we could hide, but where?"

Aunt Trudel replied: "I've thought about this too. I've even talked to some people about it. But nobody will dare once the time arrives. In Poland, people who help Jews are apparently punished with death if they are caught. No, I have made up my mind, John."

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<sup>50</sup> Many Jews who were arrested in France ended up in the Drancy camp and were deported from there to Auschwitz.

<sup>51</sup> There was a wave of deportations in the Netherlands which sent tens of thousands of Jews to the death camps in Poland.

The parting was very difficult. Again it seemed to us that the others were the luckier ones. Had we possessed the necessary money, we certainly would have joined them.

A waiting period of great uncertainty followed: Day after day we hoped for good news from Portugal. The more time elapsed, the more convinced we became that they must have made it. We already wanted to start rejoicing for them when we were hit out of the blue. A letter arrived, not from Portugal, but with the dreaded "Drancy" stamp on it.

They had been betrayed, probably by the same people to whom they had given their last money to be taken safely across the various borders. Now, they, too, sat in the transit camp. By that time, Uncle Gerhard and Aunt Edith had already been transported to a death camp.

"Could you send us a few things," Aunt Trudel asked in her letter. "We have hardly anything to wear, the children in particular urgently need some clothes."

We did what we could and sent out the parcel, which actually arrived.

One afternoon Grandma stood at our door.

Since Gerhard and Edith had gone, she also had financial worries. The money that had been left for her decreased in value all the time while food became scarcer and more expensive. Grandma was over seventy, but she did not lose courage. She had accepted sewing jobs and worked all day long. Skillfully, she turned old stuff into something new: From two old shirts she made a really great new one; she unraveled old pullovers and knitted nice, warm stockings from them. She turned coat collars and cuffs inside out. Somebody needed bed linens - Grandma found a solution. She would look at old, heavily patched sheets for a long time. Then she would say with a smile: "I'll make you a couple of pretty good blanket covers from this, and there might be some extra handkerchiefs in there for you too."

Thus, she earned her livelihood. "That keeps me young!" she asserted. She never complained. Only when she talked about her children there were tears in her eyes.

Today something terrible must have happened; we could see this right away. She pulled out a letter from her old handbag; she was weeping and shaking so hard that she had to ask Papa to read the letter to us. It was from Tommy and Fee from the Drancy camp.

*"July 16, 1942. Dear Grandma! Do not be shocked<sup>52</sup> to much about the news which I now need to tell you, today in the morning Mommy and Kurt went away to work with others but they still stay in France, also all stay in Tour to have a check first, everybody sick comes back here*

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<sup>52</sup> In our family it was always said that Grandma had "a weak heart" and was therefore not allowed to get upset. This is why Fee starts her letter that way, completely setting aside her own pain and despair.

*again. Us children all stey here and are kept very good. We are good supplyd we have very good food, better then usual, chees, bread with buter e.t.c. ... Also tonight we sleep with a family which Mommy has become friends with. They are very nice to us. At nine thirty we go for 'asemby' in the barak and then I wil hear neus, I hope good neus, only do not excite yurself to much becaus it is only for a short time. Report this leter the whole famili as I cant write to everybody. It is very sad in kamp becaus here are only old people left. Each of them has a suitcase, 200 F., and a blanket, a heavy one from us.*

*This evening we heard nothing. For today I have to finish. Many, many greetings and kisses your Fee."*

Tommy had added a few lines to the letter. His German was even worse than Fee's. After all, the children had hardly been to school at all before leaving Germany.

*"Dear Grandma, With this nues I theenk I have never cried so much in my lif, but it is now so, fathr awey from children, mothr awey from children, this few lines I writ with tears in my eys. Many greets and kiss from your Tommy."*

Only years later did we learn what still lay ahead for Aunt Trudel and her children after this letter. Millions of deported Jews shared this gruesome fate, which was beyond any imagination.

Aunt Trudel and Kurt had reached Auschwitz at night by train. When the stifling cattle wagons had been thrown open, glaring lights blinded the prisoners who had been locked in the dark for days. They had climbed out onto the platform over the dead bodies of their fellow human beings - many had not survived the trip in the narrow cage. Men and women had been separated and were driven with whips by the thousands onto a ramp. Here, the "selection" had been performed. A finger pointed to the left meant death, to the right meant still useful for work.

In what terrible state my aunt must have been after first Tommy and Fee and then her oldest son Kurt had been taken away from her! Had the strong Kurt been temporarily assigned to slave work? Had Aunt Trudel's way led directly into the gas chamber?

Tommy and Fee had set out for the difficult journey two months after their mother. What had passed through their minds as they were driven up the ramp with whips and the menacing barks of snapping dogs? Had they thought about their mother? Had they hoped for a warm meal? Had they held each other's hands for comfort?

Like millions of others, they had been ordered to take off their clothes for the subsequent alleged "delousing." They had been stripped naked. Their heads had been shaved. - The resulting

enormous quantities of hair were then industrially processed. - Then they had been taken to the "showers." Hundreds had squeezed simultaneously into a big chamber. Nozzles in the ceiling with stone "soap" in many places had briefly provided the illusion that soothing water would soon begin to flow down their tormented, soiled bodies. Then the doors had closed. Poisonous Zyklon B gas had begun streaming out of the shower nozzles. Desperate to breathe, people had trampled each other. - Scratch marks can still be seen at various heights on the walls of the death chambers.

About ten minutes later everything was over! The doors opened from the other side. Prisoners used hooks to pull out the corpses. Now the "dentists" got busy: teeth were torn out of the mouths to collect mountains of gold crowns. Only after there was nothing left to "recycle," were the corpses thrown into the burning crematorium. Nothing remained but ashes.

In Auschwitz alone, over one million people had perished. There were other death camps. Altogether, six and a half million Jews were murdered, an amount equal to the combined populations of Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, Germany's three largest cities.

## THE STAR

After our meager dinner was over, the three of us sat in the kitchen. Papa was reading the newspaper. Then he turned on the radio with the volume low, and we listened to the BBC German-language news from London. This was strictly prohibited, but in Monsieur Vaume's house we did not have to worry.

"Undoubtedly, America is soon going to enter the war against Germany," my father said after the broadcast. "It was the same in 1917. They have at their disposal great quantities of materials and supplies and an immense number of troops - that will assure their victory in the end."

"I hope we'll make it to the end," my sister sighed.

Papa nodded and gazed briefly at Mommy's picture. We had received another twenty-five-words letter from her from England through the Red Cross. Mommy had been bombed out. She had not been able to save anything except her bare life, but she had managed to find new employment since then. The last sentence: "Trying relocation to Grandma," alerted us that she was trying to get away from the German bombs in England by traveling to Ecuador. Her sister Lieschen Gumpel, along with her own family, had emigrated there in April 1939. Grandma Partos had also been able to get there at the last moment.

"An intelligent decision," Papa had said. "Mommy can't help us in England; she will be better off in Guayaquil. Besides, she won't be so lonely over there. I have the two of you here with me, after all."

Papa handed us a newspaper from Hamburg. He liked to browse through it. Although the war reports could not be trusted, he still was interested in what was going on in his old homeland  
"This is too sad," he said. "The poor boy!"

We read: "fallen in the East, our only, beloved son, hospital orderly Dieter Haller, medical student, at the age of 20. In deepest sorrow, Dr.med.G.Haller and wife."

"Wasn't that this nice young man who brought you home from swimming when you broke your hand?" Ilse nodded.

"They deserve it, all of them," I said defiantly. "They are responsible for all of this themselves. Instead of feeling sorry for them, you should think about our own relatives! Where are they? Perhaps we'll get deported in the end, too."

"Big Nazis they are certainly not," Papa replied. "Look, compare this to the other obituary notices: "Faithful unto death! With pride we now present our second son to our Führer and fatherland!" Or: "Our son, Hitler Youth leader and army volunteer, Corporal Karl-Heinz Meier, shortly before his 19th birthday, fallen for the people, fatherland and Führer on the field of honor. He has not wished for anything better!"

Papa looked at me pensively. Then he said: "I cannot rejoice over other people's misfortune."

"Every death on their side brings war to a faster end and brings us closer to freedom." I insisted.

"That might be correct," my father replied calmly, "but it still makes me sad."

It took decades before I was truly able to understand him.

Then one day the Germans ordered all Jews in Belgium to wear the Jewish star. Papa went to the Jewish Community administration where the stars were distributed. One even had to pay for them. He returned home with an ugly strip of yellow cloth that had twelve stars outlined. Four for Papa, four for Ilse, and four for me, so that all of our outer wear could be labeled. In the center of each star there was a big, black *J*, which stood for "Jude" or "Jood" or "Juif" depending on the part of Belgium one resided in and the language one spoke.

The Germans had issued detailed regulations for implementing the marking of Jews: "The labels are to be treated with care. The labels are to be sewn tightly. The labels are to be affixed approximately at heart level and are to be visible under all circumstances..."

In fact, there was an entire page devoted to regulations concerning the handling of the star. Looming threateningly at the end of it was the statement: "Noncompliance with these regulations will be severely punished."

Disgusted, I shoved the cloth away, and said: "I won't go for that. Others can do it, not me, for sure!"

"There is no point in acting like that," Papa tried to convince me. "They will punish all of us if you get caught."

Ilse took out a needle and thread and set out to do the job. From his time as a soldier Papa still knew how to sew and helped her. "Beauty is not important here," he said.

I clenched my fists in helpless anger.

In an attempt to mollify me, Ilse suggested: "You can walk the dog while we're sewing." He was a stray dog, and we had named him *Trouvé* (Found). "Perhaps you'd like to sew such a thing on him as well?" I asked and slammed the door behind me.

Like always, *Trouvé* pulled me to the butcher shop. Poor thing, he never had enough to eat. But he knew exactly where he could find himself some scraps from time to time. I let him off the leash on the off chance he might come upon something edible. A week ago, as he was wandering around unaccompanied, he had come home with a big bone in his mouth. As it happened, Grandma was visiting. *Trouvé* was about to withdraw with his loot into a corner when Grandma screamed: "Look at this wonderful marrow bone the dog has brought." She hurled herself at the growling *Trouvé* and snatched the bone away from him. The next moment she stood at the sink washing the bone thoroughly. As the dog had not started to chew it yet, the bone looked pretty appetizing. "I'll prepare a bean soup for us," Grandma announced. "You haven't eaten anything so delicious in months." Then she turned to *Trouvé*: "As soon as the bone is sufficiently cooked you'll get it back." *Trouvé* growled at her angrily. "All right," Grandma said laughingly, "I can understand that you are mad at me." We all enjoyed the soup very much. "A la guerre comme à la guerre," as they say in Belgium (You do what you have to, it is war).

The day I had to walk to school for the first time with the star, I would rather have stayed home. Otherwise, I thoroughly enjoyed my school. I now went to the Athénée Royale de Bruxelles. Richard was there too, but in a higher grade. We saw each other several times a day in the schoolyard. We met almost daily after school as well. The more vile and menacing the world became around us, the closer we became.

School was not easy. I had difficulties in French and had to get a private tutor.

There was only one other Jewish boy in my class. I felt miserable when I entered the room with the yellow sign attached. But none of our classmates stared at us or distanced themselves as I had secretly suspected they might. On the contrary, everybody was a touch friendlier and more obliging than usual. The teachers did not reveal their thoughts. During recess several students from higher grades joined me before I could even find Richard Wolff. A group of students had gathered around him as well. Many of the boys wanted to shake hands with me, others patted me on the shoulder, and one asked me to get him such a star too. "To protest, all of us should wear this thing," he said. Another one simply stated: "*Sales boches!*"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Boches* was a derogatory French term for "Germans."

I certainly appreciated that students, completely unknown to me, let me sense their solidarity. Still, I felt uneasy. My popularity was only based on the fact that I wore this yellow star.

To Richard I said: "Why can't we be like everybody else?" Richard had no answer and just said: "C'est la guerre (That's war)."

"Today we wear the star, tomorrow the deportations will start," I predicted gloomily.

## VACATION FROM WAR

A letter had arrived in the mail addressed to Tommy. How had it reached us? Did the mailman or a neighbor know that we were relatives? It was a mystery and it remained a mystery.

The colorful envelop with the return address *Mission Belge Evangélique, Camp de Vacances de Limauge*s had made me curious and I opened it. It was an invitation for Tommy to go to a summer camp. The fee was small, and it sounded very attractive. I could not explain how the Mission had gotten Tommy's name. I had never heard him talk about it. But did that matter I was fired up at the thought of going to summer camp. To leave the city, play and romp, forget all the dangers for a while, that would be wonderful!

Finally Papa came home: "I understand very well that you'd like that," he said. "At fourteen I was an enthusiastic Boy Scout. In this respect you've missed out on a lot."

I caught Papa's usual glance to Mommy's picture.

"We all miss out on a lot," he said in a low voice as if to himself.

"I can see, however, a big problem here, Gert. Our papers show that we are Germans and Jews, and we are not permitted to leave our place of residence even for a short period. But we might still come up with a solution. Vacation starts in another four weeks. *Kommt Zeit, kommt Rat* (With time, solutions come)."

The weeks passed quickly.

"*Voilà, Monsieur,*" said the Belgian clerk behind the counter curtly, and without a smile he pushed my children's ID toward me. We were now checked frequently on the streets by German or Belgian officers. Beware if something was wrong, or if someone was unable to produce an ID. I had trudged to the town hall of Uccle, and the taciturn clerk had taken my passport with the big J.

"Could you perhaps leave out the name 'Israel?'" I had asked courageously. "It isn't really my name, anyway." I did not receive an answer. Had this grumpy man listened to me at all? I did not dare say more. Even if, for the most part, the Belgian population hated Germans and the German occupation forces, there were still quite a number of people who had sided with the conqueror. That gave them certain advantages. Obviously, these people were dangerous for us Jews, and this clerk could definitely be one of them.

"Come on, take it," he said, now even more surly and impatient. Hastily I took the ID and took my leave with a brief *Merci*. I was already at the door when I stopped, dumbfounded. I had

briefly scanned the letter and the word "Israel" was missing. Under the heading "nationality" it was written "*Belge*"(Belgian). Suddenly I heard the voice of the clerk: "*Bonne chance, jeune homme!* (Good luck, young man!)" I turned around; the clerk had disappeared. Another helper whom I could never thank; again an unknown, nameless angel! I sprinted home.

"I can go to camp!" I shouted as soon as I got to the entrance of the house and produced proudly my new ID. Hearing my screams, Ilse ran out of the office and stood next to Papa.

"Unbelievable," she was astonished. "How did you do that?" Boastfully, I told all about my encounter with the seemingly unfriendly clerk. Papa stroked my hair, relieved: "From time to time one has to have some luck in life!"

Next thing, I went to Richard. I had told him about the camp before, and he had said spontaneously: "I'd like to go there too!"

"Can't Richard come to Limauges?" I asked his parents straightforwardly. The joy over my new ID had made me optimistic.

"Why not," Mr. Wolff had replied to my astonishment. "Richard doesn't own such a wonderful paper like you, still I don't believe they are going to look for Jews in a Protestant youth camp."

The decision was made, and the two of us went off.

I took to Monsieur Claude, the camp manager, from the beginning. He was a short man, but he exuded a lot of energy a great deal of trust. With him, one felt in good hands.

We met him at the train station - Gare de Luxembourg. After a train ride of a few hours and a long march through green fields we reached the camp. For a long time I had not felt as lighthearted as I did now. Jewish stars, forged papers, involuntary labor service were not issues around here.

There were eight boys in each room, and we were assigned bunk beds to sleep in. Above me slept Richard Doulière who came from Charleroi. I had learned in school that it was one of Belgium's most important industrial towns with ironworks and important coal mines.

Because Richard was so small and swift, his friends called him *Moustique* (mosquito). His hobbies were painting and drawing. The portraits he made for each of us had an astounding resemblance to the real person. We hung them on our bunk beds.

The boys had promptly turned my name into *Gérard*, as this was easier for them to pronounce. That was just fine with me. It seemed to me I had disposed of a big burden of worries along with my German name.

Although I had difficulties with French in the classroom, here I managed surprisingly well and was quite able to converse in French.

Soon it became apparent that religion was of major significance in Limauges. At first I considered the prayers, bible study, and sermons, which were spread throughout the day, to be disruptive and unnecessary. I would much rather have played outside all the time. I enjoyed sports again, which I had not been able to do since Marneffe. Also, it was just wonderful simply to lie on the grass and watch the sky.

Once, when we had to interrupt a game I complained to Moustique. "Oh, no! Another assembly! I would much rather go on here. Do you think they'll find out if we just stay outside?"

I had not anticipated that he would have an entirely different view: "The assemblies - that's mainly what we are here for," he said. "Did you forget that?" I gave him an utterly candid answer: "I couldn't have forgotten it since I never knew it!"

Now it was Moustique's turn to stop and look at me really puzzled: "To which church do you belong then?"

This yanked me back into reality. I had totally pushed aside the only reason I was really here, namely a letter I had accidentally received, one that was actually addressed to someone else. And the letter by itself would have been of no use if the grumpy clerk had not helped me.

That my bar mitzvah had been a year ago, that we went to a synagogue instead of a church where we had a rabbi and not a minister - how would I be able to explain all that to him without revealing my secret? I was Jewish even though I had taken the yellow star off my clothing a few days earlier. Should I tell him that everything preached here was completely strange to me? Especially what Monsieur Claude had said yesterday: "Jesus is the son of God who came to earth to atone for our sins through his death on the cross."

This was the essential difference between Jews and Christians. For the past 5000 years, we Jews have adhered to the belief that there was only *one, indivisible* God, and that we were still awaiting our savior whom God would send one day to liberate all humankind. At Talmud-Torah school in Hamburg they had referred to a messiah, but they had not meant Jesus. Peace had not yet spread among all human beings, after all. Peoples and nations were still being oppressed. Impossible that this could be a world redeemed by a messiah!

But I could not possibly mention all this to Moustique. Even Monsieur Claude, who knew about my true identity, had earnestly advised me to keep it to myself. On the other hand, I did not

want to lie to my new friend under any circumstances. This dilemma kept me mute. Moustique looked at me: "I shall pray for you," he said simply. I was saved from giving an answer.

We went to the big hall. They were already singing one of those beautiful hymns that apparently everybody knew. We sat down in one of the back rows and listened. Moustique closed his eyes and bowed his head. Was he praying for me? What did he wish for me? I could have placed a few orders: Above everything else I wanted to survive this war and our persecution. And then I wanted to see my mother again for whom I suddenly longed very intensely.

One day, after I became accustomed to all those hours of prayers and meditation, I brought up this issue to my friend Richard Wolff. To him, all this must have been as foreign and unusual as it was to me.

In the past days I had met him several times with a New Testament in his hand.

"Don't you read anything else anymore?" I asked him somewhat mockingly. "We hear enough of this as it is."

Richard looked at me searchingly and did not answer right away. I had learned not to pressure him. I knew he did not like to show his feelings, that he could be very reserved at times.

"You know," he said finally, "it struck me that these boys here do not just carry around the New Testament and read it, but they are able to find a passage they already know very quickly. I read a lot myself, but there isn't one book I know in such detail as these boys appear to know their New Testament. Therefore I got myself a copy so that I can read it more intensively. It just made me curious."

"Don't you have difficulties with the French?" I inquired further.

"No, and I'm actually astonished myself," was my friend's laconic reply. Then we got interrupted, but our conversation had left me engrossed in thought.

The youth in the camp were very different from the boys at the Athénée Royale in Brussels. In Limauges everybody was particularly friendly, quite obedient but at the same time not boring, but rather, joyful, carefree, and light-hearted. There was something about them that reminded me of the Orthodox children from Talmud-Torah, though I could not pinpoint what it was.

Each room in the camp had a responsible counselor to whom we could turn. Pierre Vansteenberghe, son of a minister, and a student from Brussels, was in charge of our room. We were crazy about him. He was very sensitive, caring, and helpful. He was always there for us. He never asked me anything that might have embarrassed me. I would have liked to talk with him

about the evening sermons and ask him many questions. How was this possible, though, without revealing my identity?

One afternoon, I happened to be alone in the big assembly hall. A harmonium stood there. When was the last time I had played the piano? I sat down, opened the lid and pushed the keys - no sound.

"You have to push the pedals," said a voice behind me. It was Moustique. I had not seen him entering the room.

Now the harmonium gave out sounds. I warmed up with a few chords and then tried to play the hymns that I had heard daily for almost two weeks. Moustique was surprised. "But you play without the score!" I laughed. "I don't need it. As soon as I can sing something I can also play it. Only when I don't have the exact tune in my head do I need music."

"That's a wonderful gift from God you possess," Moustique said earnestly. "You can spread much joy with it."

I had always taken for granted my ability to play by ear. After all, Papa and Grandpa did it too. I had never really thought about this, I simply enjoyed playing.

Moustique asked: "Could you also play A Toi, la Gloire? It is complex, but it's my favorite song." That is Oh daughter of Zion went through my head instantly. "The tune is by Handel," I explained. "If you sing along with me, we'll get it." It worked. Moustique had a beautiful voice. While we were absorbed in making music a whole bunch of people had gathered around us. We did not even notice.

"A mighty fortress is our God," someone in our audience requested. He hummed the tune so that I would remember. "This chorale by Luther was used by the very devout Christian of Jewish ancestry, Felix Mendelssohn Bartoldy, in his famous Reformation Symphony." I could have added, "Because his grandparents were Jewish, his music isn't played in Germany anymore." Aloud I just said, "The melody is by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy," and the music rose from the harmonium. Afterwards I also played his famous Wedding March.

Everybody laughed. "Who is going to get married here?" one boy asked. Another one held up Pierre's hand and called out: "Here is the groom!" It was rumored that Pierre was in love and wanted to marry after finishing his studies. "You're all going to get invited to my wedding when the time comes," he announced.

That evening, the sermon gave me a lot to think about. It was about the twenty-third psalm: "The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

We could use such a protector, I thought. Today, Monsieur Vandenbroeck, a minister from Brussels, was preaching. He spoke with deep conviction about Jesus as the only way to God and the redeemer of all our sins. There was nobody in this world that was perfect and did not need forgiveness. That made sense to me. But Minister Vandenbroeck also spoke about Jesus as the big protector in times of need, the savior for everyone in this world.

Somebody played quietly on the harmonium, and finally everybody started singing a hymn that I had heard many times in the past two weeks and that ended with the phrase: "*Si ton fardeau t'opresse ... je donne le repos*" (If your burden oppresses you ... I shall give you peace).

For the first time in my life I bowed my head and tried to pray: "My burden oppresses me very much. I am a sinner, and tomorrow I go back home. I don't know what awaits me there. I, too, need a shepherd, a protector. Alone we are too weak against the enemy who has superior forces. God, please help me here and forever." Instinctively, my lips formed the last sentence: "In the name of Jesus, Amen."

The next morning Ilse came to pick up Richard and me.

## THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

(Fall 1942 - Spring 1945)

The killing of the Jews was already in progress when the so-called "Wannsee Conference" took place on January 20, 1942. There, Chief of Security Reinhard Heydrich discussed the "final solution for the problem of European Jewry" with the heads of the most important German Ministries and planned the strategy for the systematic mass killing of millions of Jews. In the secret protocol there was language about the potential for killing eleven million Jews!

On March 26, 1942, the deportation of Jews from Slovakia to the death camps of Auschwitz took place. On July 22, the deportation of Jews living in the Warsaw ghetto started with the transport of 5,000 men, women, and children to Treblinka. There alone, 66,701 Jews were killed in gas chambers through August 1942. In the coming years they were followed by millions more from the Warsaw ghetto and other Polish, Baltic, and Russian ghettos. Under German occupation, the Jews of these countries were brutally resettled. Prior to the deportations to the death camps, tens of thousands had died from hunger, disease, or were shot by SS commandos or occasionally by military units. By the end of July 1942, 6,000 Jews from the Netherlands had died in Treblinka. On July 16, 1942, in Paris alone 12,884 Jews were arrested. Of these 6,000 were transported directly to Auschwitz. In early August of 1942, the deportations from Belgium and Luxembourg began...

War raged for another two years before the Allied troops finally landed on the coast of Normandy on June 6, 1944, and launched the downfall of Nazism. On July 9, Caen was liberated. On September 3, the population of Brussels gave a glowing reception to the American and British soldiers. On September 4, British troops entered Antwerp.

The unconditional surrender of the German military forces was finalized during the night of May 6 to 7, 1945. Until that moment the genocide of the Jews continued. Six and a half million Jews perished, among them approximately two million children. So few survived.

## A VANISHING ACT

Back home, two pieces of terrible news awaited me: The first concerned my Aunt Tilly Wulf. Ten days before, she and her two sons, Gerhard and Heinz, had received the order to report for labor service. They were to appear equipped with one suitcase each and provisions. Aunt Tilly had not complied with the order, therefore the Gestapo had fetched her from her house the previous day. As it happened, her sons had been out at the time and consequently were spared temporarily. My father did not know where they were. Perhaps they had been able to go into hiding somewhere.

The second piece concerned us: About two hours earlier, a messenger from the Jewish Community administration had come to the house and delivered the same dreaded order for Papa: "John Koppel, born April 6, 1896, in Hamburg, and his underage children, Ilse Koppel, born January 28, 1923, in Hamburg, and Gert Koppel, born December 21, 1927, in Hamburg, are to report on the seventh day after delivery of this order to the management of the transit camp Mechelen. Destination: unknown. Purpose: labor service." That was the approximate wording of the order.

The usual threats, including immediate arrest for noncompliance, were followed by instructions as to what to take along. The keys to the apartment had to be handed over at the police station!

Grandma had arrived right away and was sitting on the kitchen sofa, utterly distressed. Just what were we to do?

Obviously, this was not the moment to tell about summer camp, although I had a very strong desire to talk about my new experiences. The only one who gave me his complete attention was Trouvé. Again and again he leaped up against me and licked my hands.

Papa looked at me with empathy and then said: "We don't know what's ahead of us, but I am glad that you were still able to enjoy a few days of vacation. It must have been wonderful. You look so refreshed and relaxed."

"The food was great; we could play all day and do sports," I gushed. "And..." I continued hesitantly, "we talked a lot about Jesus Christ and ... prayed."

Grandma frowned and got a quizzical expression on her face. But I said firmly: "If it's God's will, then he will help and protect us. I pray to him every day!"

Now it was out in the open. Grandma was set to make a speech, but Papa waved her off and gazed helplessly at Mommy's picture.

"Gert, it seems you went through a momentous experience. We should talk about it again at length. You have to understand, though, that we haven't got time to listen to you right now, as much as it would interest us. I am very happy that you are back, but at this point I have to go off and see if something can be done about our situation. I know all kinds of people, some of them are influential within the Jewish Community administration. Perhaps I could get a job there for myself or for Ilse. Then we would be deferred from labor service for the time being. Some of my acquaintances have connections to the underground movement. I have also talked to our landlord, Monsieur Vaume. He has reliable relatives outside the city. I'll go to them right away. In any case, I won't leave any stone unturned."

When I went to sleep that evening, Papa was not home yet. Trouvé jumped into bed with me. In the winter he was a welcome heater in this unheated room. Ilse and I had often fought over him. Now it was much too hot to have a dog in bed, but I let him stay. In two or three days we would have to part with him anyway.

I did not see Papa the next day again, as he had left early in the morning to find a solution.

He returned at noon, looking very downcast. The meal Ilse served was unlikely to cheer him up: turnips and potatoes and watery soup made out of pea powder. To obtain even these scanty roots Ilse had to wait in line for an hour beginning at six o'clock in the morning. Sausages had been unavailable. The half-loaf of bread she had received with her food ration card had to be saved for the evening. Nobody starved, but this low-fat nutrition never satisfied for very long.

"So tell us already!" Ilse urged, after Papa had taken a few bites.

Papa shook his head sadly. "There is nothing to tell," he finally uttered with difficulty. "Hundreds are begging the Jewish Community administration for work and protection. However, the Community is allowed to employ only a small number of people. The Gestapo regulates this. As it is, they have already twice as many employees as permitted. They don't know anymore how to conceal this."

"My so-called connection to the Resistance<sup>54</sup> has turned out to be false. Nothing is to be expected from there, either. And Monsieur Vaume's relatives live in a tiny apartment with one separate bedroom. That would have been fine with me for a start, but the young couple got too afraid at the end. The walls were too thin, and they feared the neighbors might hear something."

"And what about the Bahrenfeld document?" Ilse asked suddenly, breaking the spreading silence.

"What is that?" I asked astonished. "I've never heard about it before."

"You don't know about it because you were too young at the time," Ilse explained patiently, "that was several years before our emigration. Papa had received an invitation to city hall. At a ceremony this document was to be presented to some of the voluntary fighters, and Papa was one of them. But he didn't go there because the Nazi Party had organized it. Mommy, however, wouldn't let up on him.. She thought one could never be sure of the usefulness of such a document. So, a couple of days later he went to city hall and picked up the paper."

"What had the Bahrenfeld people done?" I asked full of interest.

Papa explained this himself: "Right after World War I was lost and the fighting ended, a group of people - they were called "Revolutionary Communists" - tried to overthrow the Hamburg government. That happened in many other places as well. They had already occupied city hall when a couple hundred soldiers took up arms voluntarily to preserve order. A former comrade from the war encouraged me to participate, and, indeed, I stayed for two days in front of the city hall. Actually, I didn't really know what was going on, I was simply too young. Then I began to resent the political views my side displayed, therefore I turned in my gun, and went home. Nevertheless, I was later remembered as one of the participants."

"Yes," Ilse interrupted him enthusiastically, "you participated. I believe you were the only Jew. In this document it is clearly written out that your homeland must be grateful to you, and that you will always be able to count on its gratitude. Some big shots have signed in the name of the Führer."

"Of what use would that be to us now, Ilse?" Papa asked.

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<sup>54</sup> \* There was a Resistance, i.e. resistance movement in the underground, in Belgium as well. Its members tried to support those persecuted by the Germans by distributing money and food ration cards and providing shelter.

"We shall see," Ilse called out. "I'll take the paper to Mechelen tomorrow and ask for deferral of the labor service. Nobody here has such a document with such a signature. You'll see, they'll be impressed."

"I don't like your idea," Papa said, doubtful, "you'll have to deal with some murderous SS leaders. They might keep you there on the spot."

We went back and forth about it, trying to convince Papa.

"It's you who always says not every bullet hits!" I quoted Papa. "Ilse might get lucky. Besides, this is our only chance."

"Nobody will harm a pretty, blond girl," Ilse said.

"Enough of it now," Papa ended our conversation in an unusually harsh manner. "I have to think about everything quietly. I'll decide tomorrow morning."

The next morning Ilse traveled to Mechelen. Papa was terribly nervous, incessantly pacing back and forth. When Ilse returned late in the afternoon, I saw tears in his eyes. "I was so worried about you," he said and hugged her tightly.

"It didn't help," she said disappointed and also started to cry after all this tension. "They didn't do anything to me, but I did not get past the large gate. From there I could see many prisoners in the yard: old people, little children, women, hardly any younger men. Then an SS man approached me and joked. 'Hi, sweetheart, what about the two of us?' As soon as he saw my star he changed his tone immediately. I asked him to take me to the camp commander. After he made a few dirty remarks, he said: "You better tell your story to me; the commander isn't a pleasant customer to deal with."

I showed him my document and the signature, and he seemed impressed and took the paper inside. Ten minutes later he returned and said we should return all of us on the required date and show the document to the commander. "Perhaps there will be an exception for your father," he said. "You children aren't mentioned on it, so it won't help you anyway." Then he muttered something about a 'first-class funeral for Jewish heroes' ... "

"If we go there, we won't get out alive," Ilse said, sobbing.

"You don't say anything, Gert," I heard Papa's voice.

"I was praying," I replied silently, "and I believe God has heard me. If I go right now, I might be able to make it before five o'clock."

Papa and Ilse stared at each other in astonishment and did not even try to hold me back.

I ran out of the house, jumped on the trolley, and a short while later I had reached the Mission Belge Evangélique.

I went right to the office of Minister Vandenbroeck, whom I had met at the summer camp. Breathless, I told him our story. I had not yet finished, when another man entered the room. It was the director of the Mission, Minister Odilon Vansteenberghe, Pierre's father.

I had to repeat everything all over again. Both of them listened in silence.

Finally they got up, and Minister Vandenbroeck said: "This is a far-reaching decision we have to make. We are, after all, not only responsible for ourselves and our families, but for the entire church here in Brussels and in all of Belgium, as our communities are spread throughout the country. We want to pray for a judicious decision."

The two ministers left me behind in their office. I stayed alone with my fear and despair. I sat down on a chair and tried to pray too, but I had such great tension I did not succeed. The waiting seemed interminable..

At some point Minister Vandenbroeck returned by himself. Calmly, he took a seat next to me and then said: "We will hide you. God will help us."

Back home, Papa and Ilse could not believe the big news. Monsieur Vandenbroeck had instructed me to come to the mission the following day. From there he would take Ilse and me to Limauges. For Papa, Minister Vansteenberghe had arranged a move to a reliable family in Brussels, where he would stay for the time being, at least until the end of the vacation. These were all the plans for the moment.

The next day we started on our way. Each of us took only a small piece of luggage. In order to avoid being noticed we did not walk together.

Monsieur Vaume had promised to take care of our remaining modest furniture, and we gave him a few suitcases to store until we could have them fetched at some future time. We took Trouvé to Grandma. She would be all alone in Brussels now.

"I'll stay in my room," she decided courageously. "I've never registered with the police so nobody knows I'm here. Nothing will happen to me. *Unkraut vergeht nicht.* (Weeds don't go away.)"

With a heavy heart, I pulled myself away from her and quickly left the house. I turned back and saw that Ilse was leaving the house too. Without the Jewish star! Soon Papa would follow. I jumped on the step of the trolley. We had vanished!

## HIDEOUTS NOS. ONE, TWO, AND THREE

"Moustique," I said, "move over, I need some space at the bench to peel potatoes!"

Moustique looked up from his work and slipped a knife into my hand. Only then did he ask: "What are you actually doing here?" - "I am peeling potatoes, don't you see?" I joked.

For a while we worked in silence. Then Moustique said: "I have prayed that I would see you again soon. Yet, I didn't think my prayers would be answered that fast. Certainly, there must be a reason for this."

I knew Moustique much better by now, so I was not surprised. It had become obvious to me that he was a true believer. Until now I had never met a person who was so convinced about having a direct and intense relationship with God. Moustique turned his attention back to the potatoes and did not ask any further questions. I was relieved. I would have been unable to tell him the truth.

So here I was back in Limauges, this time with Ilse, who became Elsie right away. Both of us were assigned to help out in the kitchen, as was Moustique, who intended to stay here until the end of his vacation. After the boys' group, which Richard Wolff, Richard Doulière, and I had been part of, a girls' group had come to the camp, to be followed later by small children, students, and finally a group of senior citizens.

Like the other helpers, I fulfilled my duties, had my days off, and listened to lectures as often as possible. Every evening there were meetings, which became the highlight of the day for me. I learned a lot about the New Testament that was the foundation of these peoples' lives. The Old Testament, which I knew from my bar mitzvah studies and the Talmud-Torah School, was also studied eagerly. Their interpretations of the often difficult texts seemed to prove the truth of the New Testament, even to predict it. I was mesmerized.

After the meetings, I would have long discussions with Richard Doulière, who turned out to be a good teacher. He would end many a conversation with these words: "Not everything can always be explained through logic. Some things belong to the heart, not to reason. And faith comes from God."

Moustique never tried to sound me out and was very discreet. However, one day he remarked: "My whole family prays for you and your family." That meant he had told his parents about me.

When we were off duty, we would frequently roam the vast fields and pastures in the surrounding area, visit farms, or plunge into the nearby river. I was so content that I hardly missed Papa. From time to time I would receive a letter from him through the ministers who were in on our secret. "It is a very good thing that you became much more independent," he wrote. "I am very happy about it."

Obviously, he was not allowed to tell me anything about his whereabouts; there was always the danger of the letters being intercepted. He seemed to be doing quite well. At times he complained of boredom. "I write a lot in my diary," he reported.

I knew that Papa had started a diary the day the war broke out. From then on he could not correspond with Mommy any longer. He had asked us not to read it. The diary was kept in the form of letters to Mommy, and he wanted to hand it over to her right after the war ended. Then she would be able to decide for herself whether she wanted to share his thoughts with us. "The writing has to some extent filled in the void my wife left," Papa had told us at the time. But I had been much too young to truly appreciate his great longing and sorrow.

The end of summer approached. In a couple of days his parents would pick up Richard. "I have to get a few things done before the beginning of school," he explained to me.

He seemed to assume that I would return to Brussels, to my parents, to my school. That would have been the normal thing to do. But for me "normal" did not exist. I had gone underground although this place had helped me to virtually forget that. I knew already that Monsieur Vandenbroeck had not yet found a place for me to stay after the summer vacation. Ilse was to stay with a doctor's family and help out in the household and with the kids. That was not conspicuous. But a boy my age who did not go to school? Where could he be hidden? Papa was supposed to come to Limauges after the vacation to help clean up the place. No further decisions had been made.

One evening, shortly before Moustique's departure, we could not fall asleep in the hot, stuffy little room we shared, and we went for a stroll outside. The night was clear and peaceful. The full moon was so bright that we were able to walk over to the neighboring farm without any difficulty.

The cows rested idly in the meadow; they had not been taken back to the stables because of the balmy weather. We listened to the strange noises of rumination and sat down close to the animals. I put my arm around *Moustique*'s shoulders. In this harmonious atmosphere I felt the irresistible urge to confide in my friend.

"I'd like to tell you something," I started hesitantly. Moustique looked up, inquisitively.

"I'm not going back home, since I have no home anymore."

"I thought you were living with Elsie and your father in Brussels."

"Not anymore. We have to hide, because we are Jews. The Germans are after us. If they find us, we are done for."

Now I had revealed my secret. But I just had to confide in someone and Moustique was my friend.

"Jesus was a Jew too!" he said in a firm voice. I had expected a remark like that from him.

"So where will you go now?"

"Monsieur Claude and Monsieur Vandenbroeck haven't found anything yet," I admitted.

"My family has room," Moustique said spontaneously. "You can go to school with me. I'll ask my parents the moment they arrive."

"It's not as easy as that." I interrupted my friend's thoughts. "I have no papers, no food cards, no money. I can't go to school anyway; they would ask me for my identification and report cards, first thing."

"So what do you intend to do all day long?"

"My father has been in hiding for the past two months already, during which he never went out on the street. He is bored most of the time, but he writes in his diary. I guess I'll do the same."

"My parents have to help you; I'll explain everything to them," Moustique promised resolutely. "But first let us pray!"

I was ready. Where would help come from if not from heaven? I watched the moon for a long time and the countless twinkling stars so infinitely far away. And this was only a tiny part of the universe. Richard deeply believed that there was someone who stood above it all, who cared for us, and who did not leave anything to happenstance. I, too, felt strengthened by this being.

Monsieur and Madame Doulière had come with Richard's older brother, Ivan. My friend introduced me to his family. They were all very friendly to me. I would have liked to urge Richard: "Ask your parents right away!" Of course, I knew that this was impossible. His parents were chatting with many acquaintances, who had come from all over Belgium for a Sunday excursion to the summer camp.

Moustique had to wait for a quiet moment.

I went to the kitchen to do my job.

"Where is your friend?" I was asked there. "He's probably with his parents," I answered.

"If he doesn't return, you'll have to peel twice as many potatoes," they teased me.

Finally, Richard returned. There was hardly anything left to do. In my nervousness I had worked like crazy. He sat down next to me.

"They think it will be all right," he whispered. "However, you can't just come with us.

That might be too conspicuous, my father believes. Besides, he wants to talk to Monsieur Claude. There are still lots of questions."

When he saw the skeptical expression on my face he patted my shoulders soothingly and said: "Everything is going to be all right." Together we went outside. It was time to help serve food.

Moustique's parents had everything worked out in detail. They would return home with their sons. A friend of theirs would pick me up two days later and take me to Charleroi. I would stay for a short while in her house. Then she or her husband would bring me to the Doulière family. They were hoping that I would be able to slip into my hideout without being noticed by neighbors.

I packed my schoolbag. The suitcase was still at Monsieur Vaume's place. Monsieur Doulière would pick it up.

As agreed, a lady, who introduced herself as Madame Wautier, arrived at the camp. Ilse had been picked up earlier by Dr. Molinghen himself. As a physician he was able to use his car. I was delighted to hear that the Molinghen family also lived in Charleroi. But it seemed too risky to them to take both of us in the car. I could appreciate that. Why to put all the eggs in one basket? Street controls were frequent. So I went with Madame Wautier by train. There was a control shortly before Charleroi. Two German military policemen and a Belgian asked for identification. I froze with fear, as I no longer trusted my ID from Brussels. Madame Wautier produced her green ID. The officers glanced at me briefly and went on to the next compartment.

I spent three nights at the Wautiers. On the fourth evening Monsieur Wautier said: "Gérard, in an hour I'll take you to the Doulières."

We first took the trolley, then we walked through several narrow streets. This area looked much more modest than where the Wautiers lived. We walked without haste in order not to attract

attention. We went up an incline, and I got slightly out of breath. I was irritated by a smell in the air and started coughing.

"That's because of the coal dust," Monsieur Wautier explained. Big iron conveyors filled with coal rattled above our heads. Everything was black and dusty. Hundreds of workers passed through a huge gate. They looked tired, sweaty, and sooty. "Miners," Monsieur Wautier explained. We climbed further up the hill, and finally stood in front of another big gate where noise and bright light attacked our senses. Great flames shot out of a chimney followed by impenetrable smoke. "This is a foundry," Monsieur Wautier informed me. Meanwhile we had reached the top of the hill. A group of row houses lay in front of us, all of them identical. Monsieur Wautier stopped right at the first one. It was a corner house, slightly bigger than the others and, of course, had no neighbors on one side. Despite the darkness, I could make out a rather big garden behind the house. Monsieur Wautier knew his way around here very well. He entered the garden from the side, then knocked on the back door. Madame Doulière opened it. Because of the blackout<sup>55</sup> she had not turned on the lights. She smiled. We slipped into the house. "*Bienvenu,*" she said warmly and hugged me. I had reached Hideout number three.

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<sup>55</sup> During the war, windows and doors were covered with curtains every night so that no light could be seen from the outside to make it difficult for enemy airplanes to identify cities from the air.

## TERRIFIED

Life in the Doulières' house was simple and plain. They did not have a bathtub, and the only faucet was at the kitchen sink, where everybody washed himself morning and evening with cold water. The only hot water came from a big pot, which sat heating on the stove in the winter for all to use. The stove was heated with coals, which were always scarce although we lived in the heart of Belgium's coalfields. Insufficient amounts were allotted to civilians, as most of the coal went to Germany's war industry.

Once a week, Saturday, was bathing day. In the shed behind the house a fairly large wash trough was filled with hot water from the kitchen. One after another took turns bathing. In winter the warm bath water was not poured out. Because of its scarcity, everybody used the same water. As a guest I was invited to bathe first and therefore always had clean water. The Doulières would not consent to changing the order. It took me a few weeks to grasp how considerate this family was toward me without making any fuss about it. I had to get used to the toilet as well. It was a kind of dark chamber, or rather a shed - freezing cold in winter and awfully hot in summer.

Despite all the limitations, I felt very good at the Doulières. I slept in a big Belgian double bed with Moustique. Ivan had ceded his place to me and had moved back to his old bed, which was actually too short for him. But he never complained. The three of us shared a small room. Each had a little bedside table, and we shared a big armoire for our clothes. Underneath the bed was a chamber pot.

We spent most of the time in the kitchen. The "parlor" was not in use, as it was not heated. In the kitchen-living room there was a big dining table and a wing chair for the father, Alexandre Doulière. After everybody had left in the morning, I would spend virtually the entire time in that chair until the afternoon when they would return one after the other. I read a lot, mainly the Bible and Christian literature.

I became increasingly preoccupied with this new religion. The Doulière family was aware of this but did not try to influence me. That was not necessary anyway, as they truly *lived* their belief. Each day was like a gift to me, and trust in God was my sustenance. The rescue of my family I could only perceive as a miracle.

Although they displayed so much understanding for me, I became restless and irritable time and time again. Once I had a quarrel with Ivan over some nonsense. I shouted, fuming and unrestrained. That was really stupid of me, as the walls were very thin. After I had calmed

down I went to the bedroom. I was terribly ashamed and very sorry. In the meantime Monsieur Doulière had come home. I heard them talking to him downstairs. Then he came into my room. Ivan stood behind him.

"Ivan wants to apologize to you," said Alexandre Doulière. Ivan stretched out his hand.

"No, it was my fault. I have to apologize," I replied. "I'm sorry." Elmire Doulière had also entered the room. "*Pauvre petit gamin, toi,*" (You poor little boy) she said. "Such a young, strong, energetic person, locked in. To him our house must be like a prison. Nevertheless, we cannot permit him to go outside, although he urgently needs some exercise." The matter seemed to be settled.

After dinner Alexandre called: "Who wants to learn jujitsu?" What a question!

We climbed up the steep stairway to the attic. Old mats lay on the floor. Not even Ivan and Moustique had been aware of how much their father knew about jujitsu. Even less had they expected him to be a good sports teacher. We had only known that he was a very gifted painter. Many of his oil paintings hung around the house or leaned up against the wall in the shed. Unfortunately, only rarely did he manage to sell one of them.

Lessons and fights took place nearly every evening from now on. I could hardly wait to let off some energy. On the other hand, I felt that the others were not always as enthusiastic as I was. After all, they were back from work or school and tired. Still, nobody ever declined when I asked for another round. After sports we went down for dinner. Food was very scarce as the already limited rations had to be divided among five instead of four people.

One afternoon the doorbell rang. As was my habit, I slipped instantly into the shed. From there it was possible to sneak away through the back yard. I knew by heart an address where I was supposed to go. Some money lay ready in the shed for such an emergency.

But I soon heard the agreed upon knocking sign that meant: "Everything is OK; you can come out." I went back into the house. A nice lady sat at the kitchen table sipping a hot beverage from a cup. The smell told me that it was real coffee. There was even sugar on the table. All this indicated the importance of this visitor. The irreplaceable coffee reserve was diminishing, and sugar was always a luxury, anyway.

"This is Gérard," Madame Doulière introduced me. "And this is Madame Bougard." Madame Bougard spoke Walloon<sup>56</sup> like everybody else in this area. I had learned enough in the meantime to understand it to a certain extent. "My dear good boy," she said, as she patted my cheeks and hands, and gave me a hug. It made me think of Grandma, but I was also a bit embarrassed.

Resolutely, Madame Bougard got up and began to unpack two big shopping bags. Unbelievable, the things she produced: two loaves of bread, a smoked sausage, eggs wrapped in paper, lots of apples, and a bit of washing powder, tooth paste, soap, six new handkerchiefs, a warm pullover. "Knitted by myself from old wool," she said. There was even one pound of rice, some bacon, and cheese, marmalade, and candies. "I have no cigarettes, but nobody smokes here anyway," she concluded and finally conjured up two big thermos bottles filled with delicious bean soup. "I have prepared it myself," she exclaimed proudly. She went into the kitchen, brought three plates, and then we enjoyed this unexpected additional meal. The rest was saved for Monsieur Doulière and the two boys. "The empty bottles I'll take back," Madame Bougard said. "The rest stays here."

In the meantime the source of this unexpected blessing had become apparent to me. Madame Bougard belonged to the small Protestant community of Charleroi and had been let in on the secret of my presence. Ilse and I were not the only ones hidden by this community. Everyone knew Madame Bougard; everyone trusted her. She went from one community member to the next to collect food and money. "Don't ask me for which purpose," she said to everybody. "I need it for God's work. You just have to help me; there are very hungry people among us."

All the families of this community gave as much as they could spare. Nobody asked further. Madame Bougard took it upon herself to deliver the food where it was needed. This afternoon she had to make another "visit" and left shortly.

From then on she appeared regularly every month; always kind, always in a hurry, always with some good things; never without hugging me as if I were her own grandson - a delicate little lady full of energy and trust in God. What would we have done without her?

Alexandre Doulière worked for the municipal administration. One day he returned home with a wonderful identity card for me. A friend in the administration had delivered it into his

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<sup>56</sup> Walloon (*Wallon*) is a French dialect spoken by the Walloons. They live in the south of Belgium.

hands. My photo was pasted inside, and an impressive stamp was evidence of the document's authenticity. This ID looked much more genuine than any I had possessed up to now.

"What's your name?" Monsieur Doulière asked in an official tone.

I read from the card: "Gérard Dubois."

"Born?"

"December 21, 1927, in Antwerp." Antwerp was important. That would explain my accent as I supposedly came from the Flemish part of Belgium. I answered a couple more questions and did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Monsieur Doulière nodded with satisfaction. Now it was official: Gert Koppel did not exist anymore. Gérard Dubois had arrived in his place. Would Gert be able to reappear one day?

With this new ID I was allowed to risk going into the streets from time to time. I looked forward to these rare excursions. Everything else had fallen into place as well. I was even able to study for school. Moustique had organized the necessary books for me. Everything seemed to go like clockwork. Then it happened:

Between nine o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning Belgian civilians were not allowed to go out on the street. That was intended to prevent acts of sabotage under cover of night. With this regulation the German occupation forces made themselves very unpopular. One felt imprisoned in one's own home at night. The German military apprehended everybody who was caught on the street at night without explicit permission. One evening - all of us were sitting in the kitchen playing a board game - there was a knock on the door shortly before the curfew. It was an agreed upon sign; Madame Doulière opened. I heard her whispering in the hall. Then I saw through a tiny gap in the curtain a figure running away. Madame Doulière came back, deadly pale. She had to sit down. It was five minutes before nine o'clock.

"Madame Bougard has been apprehended," she finally managed to say in tears. "By the Gestapo! An hour ago she was dragged from her apartment. Somebody must have denounced her. Now the Gestapo will certainly try everything they know to make her reveal the hideouts. Gérard has to be brought some place else this very minute."

Madame Doulière mentioned a name and an address.

That moment the clock struck nine. We all knew what that meant: curfew! We were trapped!

Finally Monsieur Doulière said: "We have to wait until tomorrow morning. We can only trust in God. He is mightier than the Gestapo! - *Prions!* (Let us pray!)"

That night, I felt what it meant to be in real terror. We had all gone to bed, but I could not fall asleep. Wild fantasies chased through my head: I saw myself sitting in the big yard of the prison camp in Mechelen. I was surrounded by strangers in tattered clothing with infinitely tired, sad faces and hungry eyes. Slowly they approached me and murmured: Well, you traitor, it didn't help you after all to change your religion. Jew remains Jew; didn't you know that? Now you landed here with us, nevertheless. We are not going to get out alive from here."

I felt helpless and lonely. If only Papa were here! Perhaps I would never see him again?

What if I was to get deported to a camp in Poland? An image would come before my eyes of a boy sitting in the corner who had to sew bags, but did not know how. Soon a guard would appear; the boy would get beaten, naked, prostrated on a crate. I could feel the whip on the naked body. The boy was I...

I tried to collect my thoughts and pray: "Heavenly Father, stand by Madame Bougard. Protect her that she may not suffer so much. Let her be strong enough not to give us away."

I could hardly breathe out of fear. My heart felt like it was clamped in a vise; I was shivering despite the warm blanket. The Gestapo's tortures were infamous. Most anybody would reveal what he knew, as a result. How would such a delicate lady be able to resist the murderous methods of these executioners?

At some point I must have fallen asleep, but I was startled awake a short while later. I had just dreamed about Madame Bougard and had seen in my dream how she had been tortured. She screamed...

Soaked in sweat, I sat up in my bed and became aware that a dog was howling outside. I must have shrieked, because Richard awakened as well and said: "Gérard, be calm. Nothing can happen that God doesn't want to allow. And what he does allow to happen, he gives us the strength to take it upon us."

We tried to fall asleep again. But I could not calm down. I looked at the clock. "Another three hours and I can get out of here," I said silently to myself. But what if they came before, banging on the door: "*Aufmachen, Gestapo!* (Open the door, Gestapo!)"

Woe to the person who does not immediately obey their orders. The door would be broken down, and they would storm in yelling: "Out with these damned Jewish pigs! We know exactly that this garbage is hiding in here!" They would not fall for my papers and would drag

me to the car - like Mr. Herz back in Hamburg in 1938 - without leaving me time to get dressed. Inside the car I would certainly receive my first terrible blows. "We'll show you, damned Jewish dog! Did you imagine we wouldn't find you here?"

The Doulière family would have to suffer too: Alexandre and Ivan would undoubtedly be deported to Germany for forced labor. Perhaps they too would be taken to a concentration camp. Many did not survive this. The furniture would be demolished. Elmire and Richard would stay behind all alone. Who would care for them?

I heard Richard sighing next to me.

"Tomorrow you leave, and you are like a brother to me. I don't even want to think about it, that I won't be able to see you daily anymore," he silently moaned. He did not seem to doubt that we would survive this night.

Ivan had also awakened. He came over to us, pushed his brother a bit to the side and simply lay down next to us. "*Dieu nous sauvera*, (God will save us)" he whispered. Then we all fell into an unquiet sleep.

Madame Doulière woke us up shortly before five o'clock. She had already prepared a small breakfast. I got dressed quickly. Ivan was to take me to my new hideout. The two of us would be the least conspicuous, as many young people went to work at this time of the day. Ivan was ready. On his back he carried his tools in a bag as usual. A few of my most necessary belongings were packed in there as well: comb, brush, toothbrush, and shaving utensils, which I needed twice a week already. He smiled encouragingly at me: "In case someone asks us, we say that we go to work. If they check our backpacks , we tell them that we took a couple of things with us to change after work. We'll say that we want to meet some girls. They will certainly believe us." He had thought of everything.

I ate my bread and drank a cup of cocoa prepared especially for me, a luxury that Madame Bougard had once brought us.

"Come, brother," Ivan said in a warm voice. "I'll take good care of you." I felt that this slightly taciturn young man had also become attached to me. A kiss for Elmire, a hug for Alexandre, a tight hug for Moustique, then the door closed behind us. We mingled with the large number of workers who were on the way to their jobs. The long night of terror was over.

First we traveled a long distance by trolley. Then we continued walking for another quarter of an hour. Ivan seemed to know the area very well. He stopped in front of a house, which was quite similar to that of his parents. He rang the bell and the door opened just a bit. Ivan inched me ahead and greeted the elderly man, who was still in pajamas, with "*Bonjour, mon oncle* (Good morning, uncle)." It became clear to me that our visit was unexpected. An old lady in her dressing gown came out of a room. Ivan talked insistently and very fast to his relatives. He spoke in Walloon. Except for the last two sentences - "He's got to stay here for a couple of days. My father will come this evening to talk everything through" - I did not understand most of it. Ivan quickly said good-bye; he was not allowed to be late for work.

It turned out that I had landed at the home of an aunt and uncle of Elmire. The couple was not at all connected to the community the Doulières belonged to. That meant Madame Bougard did not know them. A while ago, the Doulières had already inquired as to whether the couple would be ready to shelter a boy for a few days in case of extreme emergency. They had not given more details at that time. Now the emergency had come to pass.

The relatives were very polite and nice to me, but I clearly sensed that these people were in great fear. They asked me a lot of questions and always demanded that I talk in a low voice and not go to the window. As soon as I entered a room, they would draw the curtains. I told them all I knew.

In the evening Alexandre came. I was very glad to see him. Somehow I hoped he would say: "You can come back to us tomorrow, the danger is over." Unfortunately, that was not the case.

"Madame Bougard is at home again," he informed me. "Poor woman, she must look terrible. Apparently, the Gestapo has interrogated and beaten her for hours. They absolutely demanded to know where she had hidden the Jews. She kept answering: 'I haven't hidden any Jews. I really didn't.' And that was correct, indeed. It seems the Gestapo did not know anything specific, and it was obvious that somebody had denounced her. After she had been interrogated all night long, the Gestapo had probably lost interest in her at dawn and wanted to get rid of her. Somebody gave her an injection in the arm. Then she was ruthlessly thrown out on the street where she collapsed and fainted. She regained consciousness when a man bent over her and asked whether he could help her. He took her to a hospital where she received medical

treatment. Now her son has taken her home. She lies in bed, and a nurse takes care of her. Her entire body is bruised, her face terribly swollen; and she seems to be paralyzed on one side. That might be because of the injection, the physician thinks. We hope it will improve with time. However, nobody knows the contents of the injection. Now we can only pray for her full recovery."

Alexandre had brought my suitcase. After he helped me to unpack he went home. Before that, he had assured his frightened relatives that they were already busy finding another hideout for me.

The following five months seemed to me like a perpetual nightmare. I could stay nowhere for very long. Again and again something would happen that would make it necessary to find a new place. Often, the change had to take place very quickly. Of course, I was not allowed to write down addresses and names, but I made marks in my calendar. One meant arrival, another departure. Sometimes I would not stay more than two nights in the same house. Then things would go well for two or even three weeks. I was handed around like a parcel from one to the next. Mostly I had to leave because neighbors or visitors had asked too many questions:

"Who is this big boy in your house?"

"Why doesn't he go to school?"

"Is this young man sick - or is there another reason he doesn't work?" Usually my hosts would answer that I was here on a visit; my parents were in the process of relocating and didn't have an apartment right now ... A consequence of these answers was that it became impossible to keep me for a longer period. My hosts would become restless and nervous and would try to get me out of their houses as fast as possible.

In the beginning I felt embarrassed when I got to a new house and then witnessed how soon thereafter people would try to get rid of me again. In time, I became more callous and did not mind so much anymore.

I had the feeling that time was passing at a snail's pace. What should I do all day long?

If there was enough to read, then I did just that. In some houses there was a piano, which I was not allowed to play, though, because of the neighbors. I never had company my own age. I spent lots of time at the radio listening to the news. Germany had meanwhile abandoned the conquest of Stalingrad after suffering enormous losses. Vast areas in Africa were relinquished; and America had entered the war on the side of the Allies.

Everything seemed to point toward an end, but what would happen if we still got caught? Whenever another "relocation" was necessary, it became increasingly difficult for me to remain confident. Although my hosts were always friendly to me and risked a lot for a total stranger, there was no absolute safety, as Madame Bougard's case had shown. All in all, I stayed with twelve different families in five months.

One evening, Alexandre and Elmire Doulière came to visit me in my hideout. After examining me with a motherly gaze Elmire said to her husband: "Gérard should get out of Charleroi. He is so pale, he never sees the sun; that's not good for a boy. We have to talk to Monsieur Claude. Perhaps there is a possibility of getting him into the countryside."

Hardly a week after this conversation, a nice young man appeared at my hosts' home. He introduced himself as Armand Nicaise and was approximately twenty-five years old. He wore clogs, coarse working clothes, and a peaked cap. He had not shaved in a long time. But he had an open face and looked at me with bright eyes.

"So this is our new help!" he said. "We are already looking forward to your arrival, because we have much work. You look as if you might need some fresh air. Working outside will do you a lot of good. You'll also put on some weight. Farmers and butchers have always something to eat." With these words he put down two loaves of bread and a big sausage for my hosts. "My mother has sent this for you," he explained.

My belongings were quickly bundled up, and we left the house. Armand talked all the time. He seemed neither to worry nor to be afraid. We went by train. Approximately one hour later we got out at a tiny railway station and sat down on a bench in the sun.

"First of all we'll have a bite," he ordered and unpacked wonderful slices of bread with butter. "Our bread we bake at home," he mentioned on the side. "The ham I smoke by myself." A bottle of beer was part of our snack. Armand drank from it and in between sips offered me some. "Slowly, slowly," he smiled, "this is very strong beer."

After we were sufficiently invigorated, we set out on our way. We had to walk for over an hour, and soon it started to rain. Soaked to the skin but in a good mood we arrived at his parents' home where five cows were about to be driven into the stable. They looked at me with their big eyes, somewhat curiously. I was delighted about my sixteenth hideout and hoped to be able to stay there until the end of the war.

## FARMER'S SON

"Get up, Gérard, it's already half past four!" Armand was shaking me. He did not know what I had in store for him. I had been awake for several minutes and was well prepared for this moment. A pot of cold water was hidden under my blanket. In a single motion I poured it over Armand's head, pushing him over at the same time. Caught unaware, he now lay on the ground, totally wet. In one leap I threw myself on my victim. But my triumph was short-lived. Armand quickly gathered himself up and threw me high into the air and back onto my bed. The remaining water was now pouring over my own head. We were in stitches; it was just too hilarious!

For a week we had been in the midst of the harvest and had to get up even earlier than usual. Every morning Armand woke me up just after sunrise: cows had to be milked, the stable cleaned, chickens and pigs fed. These were my jobs. I had volunteered for them because I enjoyed working with animals. They did not ask questions; I did not have to guard each and every word I uttered; I could even talk to them in German. Animals posed no danger to me, only human beings.

Later Armand told me how incredibly difficult I had been during the first several weeks. "Leave the boy to me," he had told his parents, "he'll soon be all right." After the many recent relocations and changes of environment, I had become nervous, irritable, timid, and agitated.

Armand treated me like a younger brother and was full of understanding. He expected a lot from me but was always ready to help and to explain everything. Once when the work got too much for me, I said something like "stupid farm work!" The very next moment I found myself lying on top of the dunghill. At the same time Armand was laughing and reaching out to help me get down. I was impressed by his quick reaction and had to laugh too. Armand was not only a friend to me but also a model that I truly appreciated. I decided to become like him. Our appearance became increasingly similar. Like Armand, I wore pants and a shirt made out of a coarse blue cloth. In my wooden clogs, which I had taken to wearing, I kept clattering around behind him. Like Armand, I shaved only on Sundays.

Armand was very religious, and yet, very different from many families in Charleroi. He had a very confident and joyful attitude toward the world. "*Soyez joyeux! (Be joyous!)*" he often quoted from the bible. Through him I got acquainted with a joyful side of Christianity. "Jews

also live their faith in many different ways," I said once to Armand, who was interested in everything. "There is a wide spectrum, starting from the very orthodox who go around with long beards and wear the same black outfits 18th-century Polish aristocrats wore, to the reformed, modern Jews who hardly follow any of the many laws and commandments, and who are virtually indistinguishable from anybody else."

Work, nourishing food, and fresh air were very beneficial to me, as Armand had predicted. I grew taller and became strong. Like everyone else, I loaded the hundred-pound sacks of grain onto our cart and was even allowed to drive it to the mill. Proudly, I sat on the coach box holding the reins. The heavy horse pretended to obey me, but probably knew the way much better than I did. I felt strong and manly. Sometimes I was almost able to forget that I was in hiding.

I had seen Ilse a couple of times. She was not in Charleroi anymore, either, but had been taken in by a very nice family near our farm. Her presence was easy to explain to the neighbors: Allegedly, she was the daughter of a friend from Antwerp where food was scarce. The country air would strengthen her, and besides she was needed for work around the house and in the fields. The Arcq family had an eleven-year-old girl, Marthe, who became like a sister to Ilse.

One Sunday, Ilse and Marthe were biking to the next village to go to church there. Suddenly German military police appeared and stopped the two. Ilse was asked for her identification. Before she could produce her false papers, one of the men had checked through the parcel that was fastened to the luggage carrier. He skimmed through the Christian songbooks and waved them on. "Let them go," he said to his colleague, "they have to get to church to sing!"

Relieved, Ilse climbed on her bike. But the terror stuck deep in her bones, and from then on she moved around in a less carefree manner than before.

Papa had also found something more stable. After there was no more work for him at the summer camp in Limauges, he had to change his lodgings frequently. Often, he would not know in the morning where he was going to spend the night. At some point, a very pious Christian family offered him a place in their home in the countryside. Later, the family also took in my cousin Gerhard, one of Aunt Tilly's grown sons.

As Papa did not live too far from Ilse and me, we were able to meet once in a while. He was emaciated. Armand, who would accompany us, always brought along some food for him. From time to time we also got parcels from Germany. Although they did not have much themselves, Erna and Gusch sent food to us at our old address in Brussels. Monsieur Vaume

received the mail, and Papa would sometimes take the risk of traveling to Brussels to pick up everything. Monsieur Vaume himself supported him with money, as Papa did not earn any.

Whenever my father went to Brussels, he slept at Grandma's place. In fact, she continued to live in her room without any outside intrusion. Also Grandma helped Papa, as she was still able to make a living with her sewing.

"Once we get to Ecuador," Papa dreamed aloud, "we will see to it that Grandma has an easy life."

In the meantime, Mommy had arrived in Ecuador, and she was all right. "With infinite longing I keep thinking about all of you!" she wrote in one of her twenty-five-words letters.

Frequently, Armand would visit the Arcq family in the evening. One day he revealed to me: "I like your sister; she is the best person I've ever met." I looked sideways at Armand and joked: "Perhaps you want to become my brother-in-law?" Armand turned red. It was the only time I had ever embarrassed him. "First the war has to end," he murmured seriously. "Then Ilse has to see her mother again; everything else will fall into place."

"Elsie Nicaise, Elsie Nicaise," I called out jokingly to tease Armand. "Go and milk the cows immediately," he shouted, "they are already mooing."

"So are you," I said from a safe distance. Armand shook his fist, and I was out of there.

In the middle of the night I woke up with a toothache. A molar had been causing me some discomfort for a few days, and now I felt an unbearable twinging and throbbing. "Look, you have a completely swollen cheek," Madame Nicaise observed. I told her about the pain, whereupon we all convened for deliberations.

"Under no circumstances may you go to the village dentist," Monsieur Nicaise said. "He is pro-German. We stopped visiting him a long time ago. The attitude of our current dentist is unknown to me. He doesn't talk much."

"Then Dr. Dujardin has to help," Armand suggested. "We'll go there right at nine o'clock. He is still sleeping now - no cows to milk," he added, throwing a glance in my direction.

I suppressed the pain and went to the stable. But Madame Nicaise came behind and milked two cows herself. "Go and sit down in the kitchen," she said. "Your coffee is ready. I prepared porridge for you today, so that you won't have to bite down on anything."

Armand led me through a back door into the doctor's clinic and then upstairs where Dr. Dujardin lived with his family. Nobody had seen us.

"Well, well," the pleasant old man greeted us, "which of you two is so sick he can't wait downstairs?" Armand pointed to me. The physician gave me his hand and asked: "What's your name? I have never seen you before. Otherwise I know everybody around here."

"I have a toothache," I said instead of giving an answer and pointed to my cheek.

"So Dr. Dujardin of all people is supposed to help you, right here in the living room? And you can't even wait. Sit down, I'll be back in a moment."

We heard him going downstairs. He returned with a whole range of instruments. "You're afraid of our local dentist then," he stated with a side glance to Armand, who nodded. Dr. Dujardin checked the tooth carefully and diligently, tapping here and there. Then he let out a sigh and said: "I have only one option at my disposal to free you from your pain: I have to pull out the tooth."

I had suspected that. But I did not show my fear and just nodded. "It won't hurt because you can get an injection. It's just that you are going to lose your tooth, which is a pity. A dentist would be able to save it."

"If that is all, I am ready to make this sacrifice for the war," I thought. And then aloud I said: "Could you please go ahead, it really hurts." Dr. Dujardin smiled and said to Armand: "Your relative has courage indeed."

Dr. Dujardin dragged a wooden chair from the kitchen and made me sit on it backwards. The injection took effect very quickly, and the tooth was out in no time. I spit out a bit of blood. Dr. Dujardin brought some schnapps for all of us. "Thank you very much, Dr. Dujardin," Armand said. "What do we owe you?"

"The glasses you'll have to leave here," the physician replied, filling them up again. He tapped the bottle with his slightly bloody forceps: "Homemade! That will relieve the pain, much better than any medicine."

"Thanks a lot," Armand repeated a little more loudly now. He probably thought the doctor had not heard him. "I'd like to pay now." Dr. Dujardin nudged us out of the room. "After the war we can talk about it. Then you'll also get some more schnapps. But for the moment, the boy has had just enough of it. Otherwise he might start singing and dancing in the street." He motioned us toward the stairs. "The other patients are about to get impatient!" Then he disappeared into his apartment.

## PREMATURE PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Summer was over; winter was just around the corner. I celebrated my sixteenth birthday.

It had become utterly clear that Germany would lose the war. The Germans were in retreat everywhere. The roaring of the engines was so loud, I was often unable to sleep at night. Huge British and American airplane squadrons flew high up in the dark sky. Heavily loaded with bombs, they flew deep into Germany to release their deadly freight. Wave upon wave passed above our heads. About two hours later I would hear them again. From the sound of the engines I was able to clearly discern which direction they were flying. I rejoiced over each airplane that made its way back to England, as many of them were being shot down over Germany. The booming engines seemed to call out to me: "Hold out, hold out, hold out..."

Through BBC broadcasts, which we secretly listened to every evening, we knew that a huge army was preparing in England to invade France.

With the onset of winter my work changed. There was nothing to do in the fields anymore. One day, Armand gave me a pair of high boots. "See if they fit you. You are going to be my apprentice butcher!"

Armand was known in the area to be a very skilled butcher. Whenever a farmer wanted to slaughter a pig, he sent for Armand. The messengers were always very secretive, but we knew what was up: The Germans had prohibited farmers from slaughtering their animals. As soon as it was fat enough, every pig was supposed to be delivered to the German army. But the farmers always managed to withhold a few piglets. In due time, the pig was slaughtered in secret<sup>57</sup>.

We appeared at the requested time, and Armand slaughtered the animal. I helped him with it. At first, I felt very sorry for the poor pigs and had difficulty getting myself to do it. This was a pretty bloody affair, after all. Armand, however, did not leave me much time to dwell on it. I had to lend a strong hand, as it was not so rare that an animal would weigh 300 pounds and fight with all its might against the ropes.

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<sup>57</sup> At that time there existed so-called "white pigs" and "black pigs." The latter were not delivered to the Germans.

Sometimes while working I thought of my mother. What would she say seeing me slaughtering pigs instead of playing the piano? *A la guerre comme à la guerre*, I was reminded. Not only did I get used to this work, but also the sense of being really needed and accomplishing something gave me a lot of satisfaction.

The next day, the farmer's entire family helped to process the meat. "My cousin Gérard," Armand would introduce me, "he is Flemish." Although I was already speaking French quite fluently, I still had an audible accent, which was not that unusual for a Flemish person.

As soon as the pig was hung in the cellar, neatly split in halves, Armand cut it expertly into pieces. They were placed in layers with large amounts of salt in a deep concrete trough and stored. I prepared the sausages: first I pushed the smaller meat parts through a grinder, then added spices, and finally stuffed the meat into the intestines. Meanwhile the farmer's wife was busy in the kitchen frying pork loins. Soon a delicious smell permeated the whole house. After work, Armand and I were invited to the kitchen table. We had freshly baked bread, butter, and schnapps with the meat. On such days I would devour huge amounts of meat and drink plenty of schnapps, until Armand's strict gaze would stop me.

Although quite often work would be from six o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night, the physical exercise and the good food that came with it did me a world of good. I continued to add weight and my shoulders broadened.

The farmers were often quite generous with their tips for the young apprentice. I was allowed to keep the money. Thus I was not only able to buy urgently needed items of clothing but also to help out Papa from time to time.

Armand was pleased with me. One day he made a suggestion: "Gérard, what would you think of going through a training program to become a butcher after the war? You could learn everything from scratch the way I did at my uncle's. Later we could become partners. I'll purchase the cattle and keep it in the pastures or in my parents' stables. We could open a store someplace and nobody would be able to procure his meat as cheaply as we would!" I was all for it, and already could see myself as a cattle and meat wholesaler.

It looked as though I would be able to await the end of war right there, when on a rainy afternoon an agitated neighbor appeared to warn the Nicaise family. Armand was away for a few days to visit an uncle. The neighbor had heard from his brother, who worked for the police, that the Germans and the Belgian police would search a large number of farms on the coming

night. They would look for young Belgians who had not abided by the order to perform labor service in Germany<sup>58</sup>.

Monsieur and Madame Nicaise were alarmed because Armand's brother-in-law, who lived with us, was one of those who had not obeyed the order. The moment he received the hint, he got on his bike and was on his way to a hiding place. But what about me? If the Germans found me, they certainly would make short work of me.

"If only Armand were here, he would know what to do!" I sighed.

Old Monsieur Nicaise looked at me annoyed and replied slightly hurt: "We can solve this without Armand just as well. You'll simply sleep for one night up in the hayloft!"

"But that's where they'll look first," I insisted. "In that case I'd rather remain in my bed. That is much less conspicuous, and they might be deceived by my false ID!"

Madame Nicaise did not share my view. Still, under no circumstances was I ready to use this dangerous hideout. "In the hayloft I'll be suspect from the start," I entreated her. "Whoever would sleep there for the fun of it?"

In my fear and despair I became increasingly excited. "If Armand were here, you wouldn't even begin to make such stupid suggestions!" I screamed, losing my senses. "You just don't get it, and you aren't ready to listen to anything reasonable either!"

Once again I had overdone it. I immediately regretted my rash emotional outbreak, but it was too late. These good people really had not deserved that. Armand's sister, who had heard my last words, hushed me and then suggested taking me to Aunt Adèle, who lived in the next village. We left right away.

The following day the danger was over and I returned. Many young men had been found and arrested. Nobody had come to the Nicaise family. But who could have known?

I had an awfully bad conscience, was very polite to the family, and tried to offer my help wherever I could. Monsieur Nicaise was noticeably uncommunicative.

I waited for Armand's return to talk with him about everything. But the next day - it was Sunday - Monsieur Claude appeared much to my surprise. He did not greet me in a very friendly way, and I had a foreboding of bad news as we went out into the garden.

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<sup>58</sup> In January 1942 some 250,000 Belgian laborers, 14% of the Belgian labor force, went to Germany voluntarily to work in industry. As need increased for workers in the military, industrial, construction, and agricultural sectors, they were recruited by force from Belgium, the Netherlands, France, and the occupied eastern territories. By the end of 1944, Germany had brought in 7.5 million foreign workers.

"My dear Gérard," he said, "you were extremely impolite toward your foster parents and refused to obey them." Agitated, I interrupted him and tried to explain my reaction.

"All that might be so, indeed," he objected calmly, "but it is a fact that the Nicaise family has asked me to accommodate you somewhere else. They became afraid and just don't want to keep you any longer. However, I don't have any place for you and can't help you."

I was stunned. What had I done here?

"Couldn't I come to the vacation camp," I asked hastily, "or perhaps to you?"

He shook his head emphatically. "That's impossible, we really have no space<sup>59</sup>!" Monsieur Claude was unable to help me. He ended our conversation rather abruptly. "I shall notify your foster parents that you will relocate within the next few days. That will calm them. In any case, you should apologize."

When Armand finally returned in the evening, his parents told him about the events in my presence. "Tomorrow I'll try to find a safe place for Gérard. Now we go to sleep. *Bonne nuit!*" That was his matter-of-fact reaction.

On the way out he stroked my head. I knew then, that everything would remain the same between us. Later from my bed, I could see through the half open door that he prayed for a long time.

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<sup>59</sup> Only much later did I find out that my friend Richard Wolff had been hidden in his place, and that in the vacation camp Harry Wolff had built himself a shed below ground where he slept at night.

## LIBERATION

It was not that easy to find a place for me. The search took over a week. Armand's parents did not display any sign of impatience, but neither did they change their mind. They were probably relieved when one evening Armand announced: "An acquaintance of mine is prepared to take you in. Monsieur Dubois has big orchards. Besides, he sometimes buys and sells cattle. I know him, because I had to perform several 'emergency' slaughters there. You won't get bored, for sure. There is lots of work to do, and I already mentioned to Monsieur Dubois that you are an all-around guy, but that you are especially good with animals!" Armand smiled encouragingly; my heart was relieved. I was proud that Armand appreciated me so much, and that apparently he had praised me to his friend. Little Gert from Hamburg had ceased to exist a long time ago. I had learned to lend a strong hand.

Armand mentioned to his parents that the people who were going to hide me did not belong to any Christian community, but that they were very patriotic and absolutely reliable.

We went off on our bikes early the next morning. Before I left, I glanced into the mirror and it suddenly became clear to me that my exterior was no longer any different from that of the farm boys in the village. That could only help.

We circled around the big Waterloo Memorial. Napoleon had been defeated decisively here. Would there be another battle at this site, I asked myself, and would this battle finally bring me freedom? I was so disappointed that I had to move to new people again.

Soon we had reached a beautiful, big, totally isolated house. A younger couple came out. The reception was brief. "How about breakfast?" the man asked right away. He turned to me: "You can call me by my first name. I'm Vital, and that's my wife." A second woman appeared. "This is my mother-in-law, Laure. Try to be on good terms with her, because she's in charge of the food around here."

I was very well treated in my new home. The family was kind to me; the work was much easier than at the Nicaise's. The only part I missed was Armand's presence. I was yearning for a normal life. When would the end come?

But first Spring came. And then on June 6, 1944, we heard the overwhelming news from the British broadcast: "American and British troops have landed in Normandy." It was the first day of the long yearned for invasion. Excitedly we followed the news daily. German resistance

was strong; the invasion came to a halt. Then the front moved slightly ahead again. For me all of it was much too slow. "I'm afraid I'll get caught at the last moment, after all," I confessed to Madame Laure, who had become my confidante.

During the day I was usually busy picking fruit. Vital owned hundreds of fruit trees: cherries, plums, and peaches. From morning until evening the three of us did nothing but pick fruit. Madame Laure cooked very well and plentifully for all of us. A nephew, Robert, joined us to assist. He was my age, and we slept in the same room. Soon we became friends. He did not know who and what I was, but took me for one of the usual harvest helpers. I was glad that Robert was there.

In the evening we would frequently play chess. I could not talk very often with Vital, because he would spend every spare moment in his dovecote. He could not wait for war to end for a different reason: He wanted to be able to release his carrier pigeons again, which had been prohibited by the Germans<sup>60</sup>. Of course, he also wanted his country to be liberated from the hated occupation forces.

I could not really complain about anything, but I had simply lost all patience. Freedom seemed so close, if only the advance of the Americans would not be stopped at the last moment.

I saw Papa more often now. He could even visit me in my new home. The way from his place to mine led mainly through fields and pastures; police checks were not to be feared. Once he found me in total despair. I felt miserable, as I had broken out in a rash all over my face and hands overnight. I had a hard time milking the cows, and I did not know just what to do. After consultation with the Dubois family, my father took me with him. He knew a reliable physician who could treat me. It turned out that my hands should not get into contact with water and had to be bandaged. My face had to be treated with a tincture several times daily. In addition, I received an injection every other day. I had to stop working for a while and was fortunate enough to be able to stay temporarily with the people who hid my father and my cousin Gerhard. We played skat nonstop, which was possible even with bandaged hands. Two weeks later the rash had vanished.

"I have to go back," I stated, "they need me there!"

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<sup>60</sup> In 1940 pigeon breeders were requested to deliver their carrier pigeons to the commandant's office in Brussels. The population dealt with this regulation in a manner similar to the way they had dealt with the request to deliver pigs.

Gerhard grinned and said: "Yes, work is calling you, but food isn't so bad at the Dubois' either, and you have a bed of your own!" He had hit the point.

On August 25, American troops entered Paris and liberated the French capital.

One morning I awoke very early. It was perhaps five o'clock. The house was still in silence; Robert was fast asleep. It was as if I had heard a distant rumble. Did I only imagine that? Propped up on my elbows I listened intently. Indeed! That had to be gunfire from the front. These were not airplanes. Were the liberators that close? Robert had also awakened.

"Let's see what's going on," he called out and jumped out of bed. I ignored all precaution, and by the light of dawn we raced to the main road, which passed not far from the house. What a sight! Disbanded platoons of exhausted German soldiers were dragging along. Their uniforms were filthy and torn. Some men pushed bicycles. Emaciated horses pulled carts with wounded soldiers. It seemed as if the Germans were left without any military vehicles or gasoline. The soldiers would neither look to the left or to the right. Apparently they had only one destination in mind: Back, back! First to a bridge over the Rhein and then back into Germany.

Here they were, the arrogant, triumphant soldiers of 1940, the conquerors, who considered themselves unbeatable, the remainders of the 1000-year *Reich*<sup>61</sup>! I remembered May of 1940, the long processions of trucks with men in those hated uniforms. They seemed to me so haughty at the time. Now, with tired faces, they were limping along eastward.

Robert and I completely lost track of the time. After the last soldiers had disappeared, a big silence settled in. Robert ran home where they had probably missed us already. Now I was by myself. I did not want company, anyway. Hours passed. I had been aching for this for so long. I wanted to relish the moment of liberation all alone.

The stuffed monkey Mommy had given me many years ago was in my pants pocket. I had carried him with me the entire time. Now I thought of Mommy, who lived so far away from us in South America. I ran up to the next village, Joli Bois.

A Belgian flag was being put out from a window, something not seen in many years. It was greeted with cheers. An old woman sobbed incessantly. More and more flags waved from the windows. Another platoon of German soldiers passed by. They did not care for the flags, or

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<sup>61</sup> Hitler had promised a *Reich* that would last 1000 years and therefore asked sacrifices from the Germans to reach that goal. His *Reich* lasted exactly twelve years. Millions of Germans paid for it with their lives!

for the hushed but sneering calls of the people standing along the roadside. The soldiers had already discarded their guns somewhere.

Suddenly men appeared wearing Belgian armbands, members of the *Résistance*. They had left their hiding places - a definite sign of liberation.

A deep feeling of sadness came over me at the sight of these men. I was reminded of Pierre Vansteenbergh, my counselor at the summer camp. I had heard that he had joined a group of resistance fighters and that in the course of one of their operations he had been captured by the Germans. He was sentenced to death for sabotage. Three days after his trial he was executed by shooting.

At that moment I was pulled out of my melancholy. The crowd pressed to the middle of the road. Then I saw them, the first jeeps followed by rattling tanks. The closer they came the more deafening the noise was. British soldiers sat on the tanks. They waved to us with warm smiles on their faces. There was no holding back anymore: gleeful people were streaming from all the houses. A few soldiers walked beside their jeeps. Girls hugged them, and the soldiers tolerated that willingly. I too, suddenly had the urge to touch them. I ran toward a young soldier and stretched out both my hands. He took them and shook them vigorously. I ran next to him. I would have run with him to the end of the world. The soldier looked slightly astonished at this big boy who would not let go of him. I regained my senses. I took out the monkey and tossed it high up into the air again and again while shouting: "We are liberated; we are saved; we've made it; thank God! Mommy, we are coming!"

I had to get to Papa immediately. As fast as I could I ran across roads and paths, took shortcuts across pastures without looking left or right. Two hours later we hugged and kissed each other. "Now let's go to Ilse!" we said nearly simultaneously. Papa managed to get hold of a tandem bike and again the way led across roads and paths. When we finally reached Ilse, Armand was already there. I was not surprised. We were all beside ourselves with happiness and were unable to hold back our tears. The miracle had occurred: After twenty-six months in hiding we could finally emerge again.

## ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL?

It would take another two long years before we were finally able to go to Ecuador. Belgium had been liberated, but World War II raged on. Only on May 8, 1945, did Germany surrender unconditionally.

We had no way to travel until 1946. However, right after liberation we were able to establish contact with Mommy through letters.

At the airport in Guayaquil my mother did not recognize me. I was almost eighteen years old and had hardly any resemblance to the little boy she had last seen in Antwerp. With delight, I slipped my little stuffed monkey into her hand. That said more than words ever could.

In Ecuador, after a while, Ilse and I returned to Judaism. Ilse married a young Jewish émigré and had three children. A few years later I also got married and, like my sister, had three children.

At the beginning of 1960, my family and I left Ecuador and found a new and final home in San Diego, California. Ilse joined us later with her family, and soon after that our parents followed. The two of them died at an advanced age after they had spent another thirty years together, united with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Grandma Koppel had stayed in Belgium at first. She was still hoping that at least one of her children or grandchildren would return. After a year of futile waiting she tried to come to terms with this cruel fate. "I want to come to you now," she wrote one day. My parents were able to provide her with a peaceful old age without worries. She died at the age of eighty-eight and was buried in Guayaquil.

Uncle Herbert, Grandma's second oldest son, had immigrated to Palestine. Grandma's greatest wish was to visit him and his family there and to get to know her great-grandchildren. Her wish was fulfilled before her death.

Bruno and Bertel Gumpel had immigrated to Ecuador in 1938. Their children live in San Diego today.

For the most part, my mother's family gathered in Ecuador. Mommy's sister, Lieschen Gumpel, had managed to get there with her husband and their two children in April of 1939. At the last moment in 1940, Grandma Partos was able to get there, and she was buried there as well. In time, the other family members all came to San Diego.

My cousin Inge, the daughter of Mommy's oldest sister, who had done so much for my father, had also had to go into hiding during the last months of the war even though her father had not been Jewish. She survived and married a Dutchman. Today she lives in the Netherlands, surrounded by her three children, her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Uncle Laczi Partos and his family were the only ones in our extended family to go back to Hamburg from Budapest after the war and resume work in their former trade.

In San Diego we are again a large extended family, but it will never be the same as it used to be in Hamburg before the war...

My friend Richard Wolff and his family survived the dreadful years. He now lives in Chicago. After completing his studies in theology, he devoted his life to Christian work. Despite the differences in the directions of our lives, we are still very close to each other.

It is always difficult for me to talk about the victims.

Aunt Tilly Wulf, Papa's oldest sister, was deported to Auschwitz and perished there. Her husband Paul Wulf was also deported to Auschwitz on August 12, 1942, and never came back. Their oldest son Gerhard, who had been in hiding with my father, survived. Initially, he immigrated to the United States where he eventually succumbed to mental illness. For the rest of his life he believed himself to be in hiding and under persecution. He spent forty-five years until his death in a mental asylum near Hamburg. His brother, Heinz, managed to get to Palestine right after liberation. There he participated in the War of Independence and died, weapon in hand, in his new homeland.

Aunt Trudel Gumpel, who had lived with us in Belgium, was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on July 20, 1942 with her eighteen-year-old son Kurt. On September 23, 1942, my beloved cousin Fee and her brother Tommy followed them. They were thirteen and eleven. None returned.

Aunt Edith, my father's youngest sister, and her husband Gerhard Stoppelmann were also deported from Drancy to Auschwitz, never to come back again. Gerhard Stoppelmann's parents managed to pass the war unscathed. As they had lost their only son, they went to relatives in England, where they lived on for several years more.

Uncle Erich, Papa's youngest brother, died in Auschwitz with his fiancée. He was only twenty-eight years old.

Renate and Peter Pollak from Hamburg, who at first had lived with the Stoppelmanns and then had returned to Germany, were deported with their mother to Riga on December 6, 1941.

All three of them perished. Many of the teachers at Talmud-Torah School did not manage to leave in time. Leopold Hirsch and Emil Nachum were deported with their families and never returned. Our old teacher Mathias Stein and his wife also became victims of the Nazi murderers.

Over the years since then, I have met many of my saviors again. I have traveled several times to Belgium, sometimes by myself and sometimes with my children who are adults now.

My good friend Richard Doulière (Moustique) became a minister. Today he lives in France with his family and runs a vacation camp there, where, as in the days when we were together, Christian children from Belgium and France can spend their summers. Ivan, Richard's brother, became a minister as well. Even now, their mother Elmire sees me almost like a third son.

I also visited Armand Nicaise before he died. He was married (not to my sister, however) and stayed in the little village that has turned into a suburb of Brussels. Houses now stand where there were once fields and pastures.

Monsieur Vandenbroeck I have never seen again, but I was able to tell his granddaughter what her grandfather had done for us.

Erna and her husband survived the heavy bombardments of Hamburg. She has always kept in touch with us, and I have visited her several times in Hamburg.

I am thankful that I stayed alive, that I could learn, that I could find a family of my own, and that I lived to experience so many wonderful things. Why did I survive and others did not? Is there ever an answer to this question?

